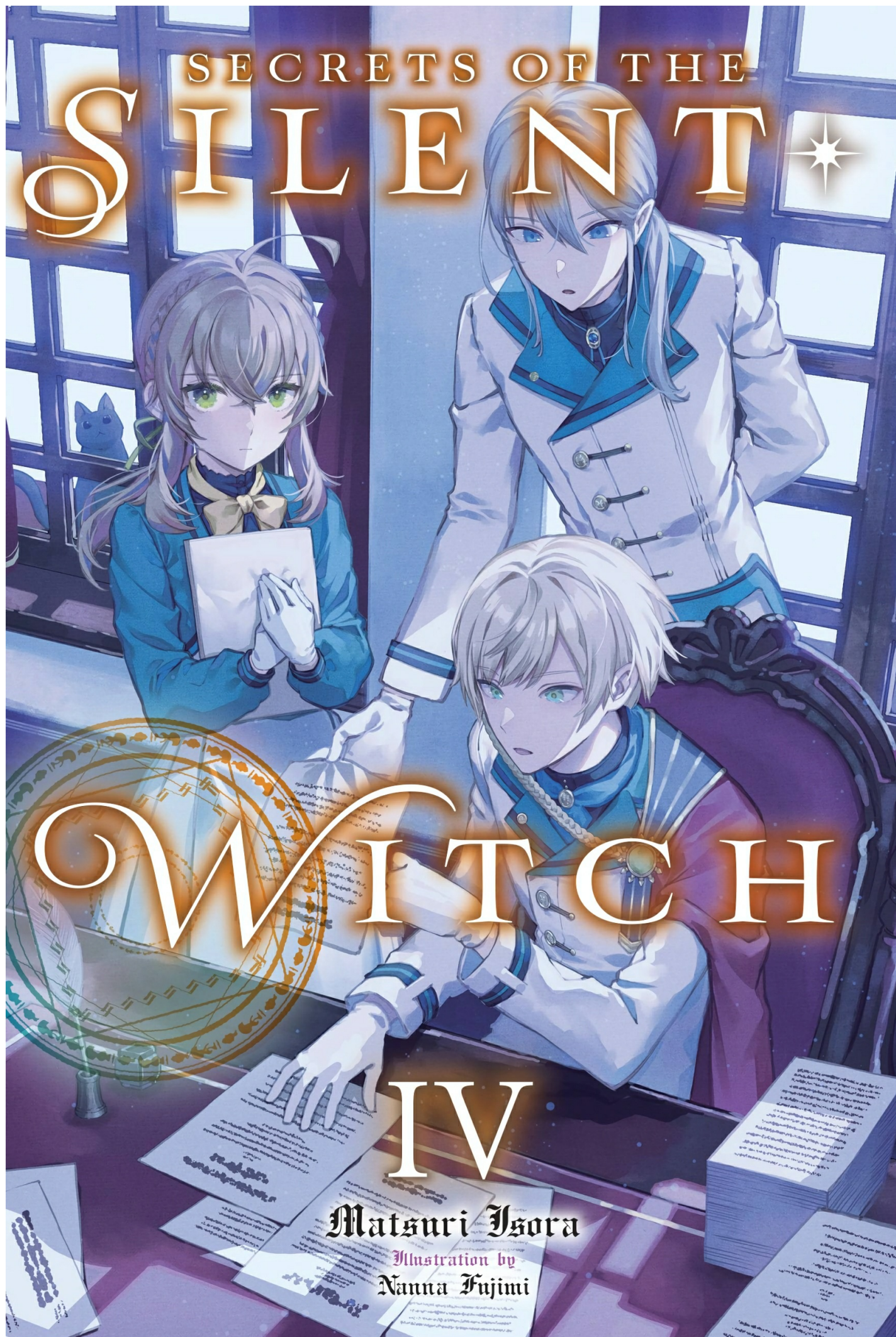




SECRETS OF THE

SILENT



WITCH

IV

Matsuri Isora

Illustration by
Nanna Fujimi



The Abyss Shaman

RAY ALBRIGHT

The current head of House Albright, the only line of shamans in the Kingdom of Ridill. His family members are the sole keepers of all knowledge regarding the shamanic arts, which appear similar to magecraft but are in reality quite different. An anomaly within the Seven Sages, Ray's body is engraved with more than two hundred shamanic seals.

SECRETS OF THE
SILENT★
WITCH
IV





“Hey! I’m gonna fall! I’m gonna fall!”

“I-I’ll be fine... Wah-hyahhh?!”

Monica straddled the broom, then deployed an uncharted flight spell. The broom slowly floated into the air, carrying her with it.

She’d just learned flight magecraft, and she was still far from mastering it.

As Monica’s head wobbled to and fro, Nero clung to her more tightly.



The dress was a calm green with a streamlined design, its upper part featuring minimal ornamentation.

On the whole, the dress was cute, but not too childish. It had a casual beauty without being overly flowery. Everything about the garment, down to its minor details, had been calculated, and even Monica—who knew nothing about such things—could tell that it suited her.

SECRETS OF THE
SILENT ✧
WITCH

IV

Matsuri Isora

Illustration by **Hanna Fujimi**


New York

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SECRETS OF THE SILENT WITCH IV

Matsuri Isora

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SILENT • WITCH Vol.4 CHINMOKU NO MAJO NO KAKUSHIGOTO

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PROLOGUE

The Girl Who Fled Into a World of Numbers

Before Monica Everett was known as the Silent Witch and the youngest ever to join the ranks of the Seven Sages, before her adoptive mother, Hilda Everett, took her in—back when she was still Monica Reyn, there was a period of time where she forgot how to speak.

She was ten years old when her biological father, Venedict Reyn, was executed for the crime of researching forbidden magic. The motherless Monica was taken in by her uncle on her father's side, and she lived every day in fear of him.

Her uncle hated her father. "Because of his idiotic research, they treat me like the brother of a criminal," he'd said. "Because of him, my life is in shambles."

Each time her uncle said these things, Monica would desperately protest. Her father's research was wonderful. It could have saved the lives of so many people. He had done nothing wrong.

But each time Monica opened her mouth, her uncle screamed at her in anger. "Be quiet! Silence! Shut your mouth!" He'd swing at her with his fists and refuse to feed her.

He'd chase her out of the house for stretches of time, and Monica would plod aimlessly through the streets. The townspeople she passed spoke derisively in whispered tones—all of them criticizing her father.

And as this gradually wore down her body and spirit, she eventually began escaping into a world of numbers.

Every time her uncle hit her, every time he locked her in the shed in the dead of winter, she would single-mindedly repeat to herself all the equations and magical formulae she'd seen in the books in her father's study. Doing so dulled the pain in her body and the brutal chill of winter.

Those strings of numbers were her salvation. That perfect and beautiful world would never harm her. It was simply *there*, forever perfect and beautiful.

Sometime after she began retreating into the world of numbers, Monica's mind started to distort. First, she lost the ability to recognize other people as people. She understood all their numbers—the size of their faces; the angle and distance between their eyes; the length, width, and height of their noses; the angles of their jaws; their height; the length of their arms; the length of their legs. But they no longer registered to her as *people*. In her eyes, everyone looked like a bunch of numbers.

Next, she lost the ability to recognize the words other people were saying. She could tell the bunches of numbers in front of her were making sounds, but their meanings escaped her. And since she didn't know what they were telling her, she would assemble the numbers of their sounds into equations, solve them, and give the results.

"All you ever say is numbers, numbers, numbers! You're a freak!"

Even her uncle's insults were indecipherable. Monica couldn't understand what the words meant anymore.

The only thing around her was that beautiful world of numbers.

After a year in her uncle's care, Monica had broken so completely that numbers were the only thing she could perceive and recognize.

"The world is filled with numbers."

This was a pet phrase of her father's, and Monica clung to those words as she turned away from reality, fleeing into that beautiful numerical world that would never hurt her. Her body shut everything down save for the bare minimum needed to keep her alive, and her already skinny frame thinned until she was just a stick.

Every day her body withered, and she drew closer to death. But what did it matter?

If I learn lots of equations and magical formulae, my father will praise me.

Calling to mind her father's gentle smile as he patted her on the head, Monica slumped against the outer wall of the house—she'd been kicked out again—and grinned vacantly. "Five hundred fourteen thousand two hundred twenty-nine, eight hundred thirty-two thousand forty..."

“One million three hundred forty-six thousand two hundred sixty-nine,” came a voice, providing the continuation to Monica’s sequence.

Slowly, Monica lifted her head. A bunch of numbers in front of her had just made a sound.

“The sequence from ‘Old Man Sam’s Pigs’...” said the voice. “Professor Reyn must have taught that to you, Monica.”

After a moment, she repeated, “*Mon-ic-a?*”

How long had it been since someone called her by her name? All her uncle ever called her was “trash” or “blockhead” or the like.

It had been a long time since she heard her father’s name, too. After all, everyone treated it like a curse they dared not speak aloud.

Her name—and her father’s—dragged Monica out of her unfocused numerical wanderings and back into the real world.

“My name...,” she said. “The name Daddy gave me—Monica Reyn...”

She hadn’t spoken any words besides numbers in a long time. She noticed how parched her throat was. Gradually, she regained her sense of hunger, of cold, and of physical pain.

Despite these sensations, her eyes opened wide as she looked up at the bunch of numbers—no, the human being standing in front of her. It was a woman, likely in her mid-thirties, with neatly combed brown hair and sharp glasses. And she knew Monica’s name. This was Hilda Everett, a researcher who had once served as her father’s assistant.

The woman got down on her knees in front of Monica, then removed the stole looped around her neck and put it on the girl. At last, she hugged her, saying, “The professor would be so sad if he saw you like this.”

“Daddy... Daddy... Daddy...”

The woman didn’t punch or kick her, even when Monica talked about her father. She simply held her in a tender embrace and mourned his loss.

Tears began to form in Monica’s dry eyes. “It’s...not Daddy’s f-fault...,” she stammered. “He’s... Daddy isn’t...”

“Professor Reyn was a wonderful person.”

“Daddy, they burned him, they burned it all...,” she managed before sobbing convulsively.

Hilda’s arms tightened around her. The act was enough to tell Monica that the woman was sad about her father dying.

Wrapped up in her embrace, Monica cried. “Daddy, Daddy,” she wailed between sobs and sniffles—the loudest sounds she’d produced in a long time.

She cried and cried and cried, just like a little child.

Hilda was an exceptional member of the Royal Magic Research Institute, and that made her a very busy woman. But she still adopted Monica and gave her the best care she could. She would cook for her, bake with her—and when she ended up setting the kitchen on fire, she rushed to hire a housemaid. Hilda was disastrously unsuited for housework, as it turned out.

The housemaid’s presence improved both their lives dramatically, and within a few months, Monica had mostly regained her speech.

While Hilda worked at the Institute, Monica passed her time reading books on magecraft in Hilda’s room. Both Hilda and Matilda, the housemaid, were kind people, but Monica was still scared to go outside and be around others. So instead, she would read Hilda’s books and decipher the magical formulae within, thinking of ways to break them down and put them back together.

One day, when Hilda returned from the Institute, she saw the girl silently writing a magical formula on a sheet of paper, and her eyes went wide.

“That formula...,” she said. “It’s an ultra-small flame spell with a fixed coordinate axis, right?”

Monica’s head bobbed up and down.

Hilda looked confused. “I don’t recall having a book with that formula...”

“It’s, u-um,” stammered Monica, “based on the formula you used while, uh, we were baking cookies.” Her words were still broken up and muddled. “I was, errr, um, just thinking about, well, what kind of formula would be optimal. For, um, baking the cookies without, well, burning them. And it was fun, so...”

Monica went on to explain, in her own faltering, awkward words, this magic formula she'd come up with. Baking a delicious cookie wasn't just about putting it under a flame. You had to heat it all the way through from all sides. To that end, she'd been thinking about how to construct a heat-resistant barrier. If you confined a flame spell within such a barrier, the heat wouldn't escape. Place the cookie inside, and in a few minutes you'd have a perfectly baked treat.

Hilda was both a member of the Royal Magic Research Institute and a first-rate mage in her own right. Monica was frankly embarrassed to show a magical formula she'd come up with to such a talented person. Especially since this formula had been born as a result of the woman's massive failure to bake cookies. Monica trembled, afraid that her adoptive mother would be angry with her.

But Hilda wrapped her up in a hug instead. "Monica, that's amazing!" she exclaimed in excitement. "I can't believe you learned compound magecraft on your own and even used it to put together your own formula. Not everyone can do that, you know!"

Behind her, the veteran maid, Matilda, took on a more critical expression. "Lady Hilda," she said, "I can't help but wonder what on earth led you to try and use magecraft to bake."

"I made the most rational choice at the time," insisted Hilda.

"Scorching the kitchen walls was rational?" asked the maid.

Hilda released Monica from her embrace and pushed up her glasses. Then, with the air of a scientist setting about a difficult experiment, she said, "The most rational choice doesn't always lead to the best results."

"Please use the oven next time," said the housemaid.

Hilda ignored the maid's very reasonable solution and looked straight at Monica. Her eyes were filled with kindness and compassion, but they also seemed distant. She was probably seeing Venedict in his daughter.

"You really do have talent, Monica," she said, taking the girl's hand. "If I teach you the fundamentals of magecraft, will you take the entrance exam for Minerva's?"

Minerva's was the Kingdom of Ridill's highest learning institution for magecraft. But to be perfectly honest, Monica didn't want to go to school. She was afraid of being around other people. Especially a school like Minerva's, which used a dormitory system for all its students. And she'd be separated from Hilda.

But she understood she couldn't simply stay holed up in Hilda's house like this. If she graduated from Minerva's and gained her mage certification, she wouldn't have to worry about finding a job. And she could repay Hilda for all she'd done, too.

"Minerva's... Okay, I'll take the emphrance examph," she murmured with a nod, fidgeting.

Hilda nodded firmly. "I'm absolutely certain you'll become an amazing mage!" she said. "Let's put it to the test right away! We'll bake some cookies using the compound spell you came up with!"

"Please use the oven, my lady!" urged the housemaid.

Hilda brushed her off, determined to test out Monica's idea of using a small flame spell and heat-resistant barrier.

The experiment was a brilliant success. The cookies heated all the way through, turning into wonderful little lumps of charcoal.

The Silent Witch is shy and inhuman.

She's a creepy little girl who sees people as nothing more
than a bunch of numbers.

But what does it matter?

The Silent Witch is a true genius.

SECRETS OF THE
SILENT★
WITCH
IV



CHAPTER 1

My Prince

With only four days left until Serendia Academy's school festival, the members of its student council were even busier than usual. Monica was no exception.

Normally, she was in the council room knee-deep in clerical work. That day, however, she headed out to negotiate. Apparently, the magic history research club was unhappy with their budget and the location of their festival exhibit. Location aside, Monica was the accountant, so she was directly involved in the budget.

For that reason, they'd sent her to hear the club out in person. *I wonder if I'll be able to negotiate properly*, she thought, growing nervous... *They don't seem to be happy with the budget. What if they yell at me...?*

Any tasks that forced her to interact with others were pure agony for the shy, introverted Monica. And these people were already unhappy. Monica nearly collapsed out of fear, but she took a deep breath and headed for the club's room, her legs still trembling.

I'm pretty sure, um, that I've grown since my first day here at Serendia Academy...

Monica Norton of the student council was only a persona Monica was using temporarily. Her true identity was that of Monica Everett, the Silent Witch and one of the Seven Sages—the Kingdom of Ridill's most talented magecraft practitioners. Until recently, she'd been living in a cabin in the mountains isolated from other people. But ever since taking on a secret mission to protect the kingdom's second prince, Felix Arc Ridill, she'd been spending a lot more time around her fellow humans.

Just the other day, she'd made her societal debut as a delinquent and wandered the nighttime streets of a town in the midst of a lively festival. She still felt strange whenever she thought about that night.

The day after their evening adventure, Felix showed up to the student council room looking like the perfect prince, just as he always did. Ike with his mischievous smile, whose eyes had sparkled at books about magecraft, was no longer there.

That made Monica a little lonely. It was like she'd lost a friend, never to see him again. *It's so strange, she thought. I'm his bodyguard, so I see him every day, and yet...*

As she was thinking this through, she quickly arrived at the clubroom. Standing before the door, she balled her hands into fists and went over what she was supposed to do.

The magic history research club is unhappy with their exhibit's location and their budget. My first task is to hear them out. If I don't think I can handle it myself, I'll go back and explain what's happening. That's what Lord Cyril said to do, at least...

She was pretty sure the club members would be hostile toward her as a student council member. To prevent that hostility from swallowing her whole, she took care to keep her back straight and knocked on the door.

"Hello, hello! Sorry for the wait— Oh? Hmm? You're..."

A slightly plump boy with black hair appeared in the doorway. He wore round glasses. This was the club president, Conrad Askam—the one Monica would be negotiating with.

"I'm, um, Monica Norton, accountant for the student council. I've come here to, um, hear what you have to say." She managed an unusually spirited, clear introduction, then waited for the boy to respond.

Would he glare at her? Would he yell in anger? No—Conrad's response defied all Monica's expectations.

In a calm voice, he said, "Please wait a moment," then shut the door again.

Monica stood outside the clubroom, mouth agape. She heard Conrad's voice from inside, and it sounded enthusiastic. "Everyone! One and all! A student council member has deigned to visit us!"

She then heard a group of male students cheer in response.

“Bring out our best cushion!” shouted Conrad. “Fetch snacks and tea! We need to do this right! Perfect hospitality!”

“I shall prepare them forthwith, President!”

“Always remember to smile! Only your best manners for our lady guest!”

“We understand perfectly, President!”

As Monica, dazed, stared at the door, it soon popped back open. Conrad appeared, his round face now sporting an ingratiating smile as he invited Monica inside.

“I’m terribly sorry for the wait,” he said. “Come in, please, come in, Lady Norton!”

“O-okay...”

The room’s interior gave off a cramped impression—likely due to all the bookshelves and storage units packed into an already smallish room. The left-hand wall upon entering had two rows of three bookshelves holding a variety of folders and papers. These alone were quite oppressive.

The other side didn’t have anything set against the wall, but documents had been pinned all across it instead, covering it up. Two male students stood near it. Including its president, Conrad, the club consisted of just three people.

But there *was* a fourth person in the room. They reclined languidly on a guest sofa near the back—a certain noble lady with straight black hair and lapis lazuli eyes exuding a mystical beauty.

“Lady...Lady Claudia?” Monica stammered.

Claudia Ashley, daughter of Marquess Highown, shifted her gaze. When she saw Monica, her beautiful face twisted into an expression of despair. Somehow, it felt like the humidity in the room had risen.

“...Why aren’t you Neil?” she asked.

“Um, ummm...,” responded Monica, confused. From what she knew, Claudia didn’t belong to this club—or any kind of committee, for that matter. So why

was she here?

Conrad showed Monica over to the sofa, still smiling. “Please take a seat, Lady Norton. We are *incredibly* honored to have an esteemed member of the student council visit despite your busy schedule. Yes, indeed.”

“Um, yes, w-well...,” stammered Monica, sitting down next to Claudia and nervously broaching the subject at hand. “I heard you’re, um, unhappy with the budget and exhibit location.”

Conrad sat down across from them and nodded deeply. “Yes, it’s true. You are quite right about that. As you know, we at the humble magic history research club are slated to present our findings at the school festival.”

He paused, placing his entwined fingers against his soft-looking chin. His round eyes popped open wide behind his glasses. “But not only have we been disallowed from using Exhibit Room One, we are expected to present in this very clubroom—a room that is far from the entrance, difficult to find, and whose appearance does us no favors!”

It was as Conrad said—this room was much, much farther back than Exhibit Room One, where the majority of the festivalgoers would be gathered. Unfortunately, they couldn’t appropriate any empty classrooms nearby, either.

“Ummm,” began Monica hesitantly, “some of the hallways and classrooms will be closed for security reasons, so...it’s a little, well, late to change the exhibition location...” Despite visibly shrinking away, she’d managed to form a reasonable response in her desperation.

Conrad’s smile looked very gentle and mild-mannered as he replied in a coaxing voice, “Indeed. So we have been hard at work looking for another place for our exhibit. And at last, we’ve found one—to the side of the front entrance!”

He’s right, thought Monica. There’s a little open space just outside the front entrance, to the side. But research presentations were always done *inside*.

“Well,” she began, “I don’t think Serendia Academy has any equipment for outdoor exhibits...”

“You’re quite right,” said Conrad. “That is why we’d like additional funding in

order to set ourselves up outside. We believe there's just enough time for it."

He chuckled. It sounded like he was forcing bursts of air out of his throat. Then he looked over at Claudia.

"In addition, we would like to ask Lady Claudia Ashley to present our research," he said.

"Y-you would?" replied Monica.

He chuckled again. "She *is* a descendant of the Lineage of the Wise. People call her the Walking Library. I'm sure it would be quite a simple matter for her to deliver our presentation to the masses. In addition, if we have one of the school's three most beautiful girls staffing an outdoor exhibition, we will be sure to attract interest!"

Monica nervously turned to look at Claudia. Her expression screamed, *I hate all of this*. The sentiment was practically palpable in the air around her.

"Um, Lady Claudia," Monica began. "Do you... Do you intend to agree?"

Claudia slowly straightened up in her seat, leaned against Monica, and whispered lowly into her ear, "Of course not."

Her voice sent chills down Monica's spine. The words carried an unusual, quiet anger.

"I hate people who treat me like a public library," she continued. "And using me to attract guests? They must be joking."

"Th-then why...?" Monica trailed off. Claudia hated wasting time; Monica would have assumed she'd immediately refuse and leave. But then why was she still in the room?

As if sensing the question on her mind, Claudia smirked evilly. "If I were unjustly held captive, a member of the student council would come to my rescue, yes? I was pretending to be a damsel in distress, waiting for my lovely prince to save me. Unfortunately, instead of Neil, *you* came. Why is that?"

"I... I'm sorry," replied Monica weakly, despite thinking the whole thing very unfair. She felt bad for Claudia, who had expected her fiancé, Neil, but Monica had been entrusted with this matter, not him.

I have to solve this problem myself and free Claudia, she thought, turning back to look at Conrad. “Um, well,” she said. “The priority for exhibition locations and budget, is, uh, determined by the club’s accomplishments and number of people. So, ummm...”

“Yes, indeed,” replied Conrad. “I understand well what you’re saying, Lady Norton. We only have three members and no noteworthy accomplishments. The field of magic history research itself is not very large to begin with.”

He lowered his eyes sadly, causing a pang of guilt in Monica’s heart. Magic history was only a part of fundamental magic studies, so the field offered few opportunities for research presentations. Because of that, it was difficult for anyone involved to achieve much. Monica felt even worse about it because she’d witnessed that reality personally on several occasions during her time at Minerva’s. *I wonder if there’s any way I can help them,* she thought.

Conrad glanced over at the two students waiting by the wall. “And so we would like to have you, a member of the student council, personally review our presentation.”

“Um, me?” asked Monica.

“Yes! If you would, please have a look at this and consider reevaluating our club’s standing!”

The two students brought over some rolled-up documents and quickly unfurled them. Conrad then proceeded to eloquently explain their research.

* * *

Vice President Cyril Ashley was scanning through a pile of papers in the student council room when he glanced up at the wall clock and frowned. Monica had left to visit the magic history research club *ages* ago.

While the girl was incredibly skilled when it came to clerical work, she was a poor negotiator. She’d freeze up simply introducing herself to someone she’d never spoken to before. Would she really be able to find out what the club was after?

I thought I told her only to listen to them, not force herself to solve their problems. The club’s president wasn’t the type to rely on intimidation, but that

didn't ease Cyril's worry about Monica and her shyness.

He imagined her growing so nervous that she frothed at the mouth and fainted. Finally, he put his feather pen in its stand and stood up. "Sir, I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Right," said Felix, laughing a little as he nodded. He probably knew exactly what Cyril was up to.

Feeling awkward, the vice president hurried out of the council room a little faster than usual and made his way to the clubroom.

He knocked on their door and was soon greeted by the club's president, Conrad, who wore a wide smile on his face.

"Well! Vice President Ashley!" he said, laughing breathily. "Welcome to the magic history research club."

"You'll have to excuse me," replied Cyril. "Accountant Norton was supposed to pay you a visit..." He trailed off, peering past Conrad and seeing the two girls sitting on the sofa in the back.

One of them was Monica. The other was Cyril's younger stepsister, Claudia. *Monica I can understand, but what's Claudia doing here?* he wondered, baffled.

Claudia leaned back against the sofa cushion and stared up at the ceiling, looking like the world was about to end. "...Why is it *you* this time?"

"What are you on about?" he said, irritated. *He* had a good reason to be here; she had no right to complain.

Claudia snickered and smiled darkly. "I am a captive damsel, waiting for my prince to come rescue me," she explained. "Do you...*understand*?"

That wasn't the smile of a princess waiting to be saved. It was the smile of an evil witch unjustly occupying the clubroom.

As Cyril stood there in confusion, Monica suddenly looked up and ran over to him. "Lord Cyril!" she exclaimed.

She seemed neither overwhelmed nor afraid. In fact, he might say she was *energetic*. Almost overly so. Cyril sighed in relief as Monica held up the papers in her hand and began to rattle off an extended explanation.

“Lord Cyril, please look at this!” she pleaded. “Th-these papers! They’re amazing! It’s a very straightforward summary of the role of mages and magical items in the kingdom’s history! And their numbers are extremely concrete, and the way they use graphs is superb...!”

The club president gave another one of his breathy laughs. “No, no, it’s hardly that impressive,” he said before proudly chuckling some more at Monica’s side.

All expression vanished from Cyril’s face and a chilly air began to flow out from him. Monica, however, didn’t notice.

“And also!” she went on. “It doesn’t only touch on modern and ancient magical items—it even talks about shamanic tools! There is so little literature discussing cursed tools in the context of historical magical items that—”

“Accountant Norton,” Cyril interrupted coldly. She froze. “What about the issue at hand? The exhibit location and the budget?”

Gripping the documents tightly in her hands, Monica allowed her gaze to drift awkwardly. “Um, well, u-ummm...,” she stammered. Claudia simply offered a hollow smile.

As if to brush away this difficult atmosphere, Conrad adopted an even *more* cheerful tone and addressed Cyril. “Come, come! Please take a seat over here.”

“Your attempts to appease me are meaningless,” Cyril replied. “We will not acknowledge a change in your exhibit’s location *or* additional funding.”

“Now, now!” continued Conrad. “I’d like you to hear me out for a moment regarding our club’s principles. You see, one of our missions is to learn about the royal family of Ridill through the lens of magic history, thereby illuminating its greatness. And so...”

* * *

“And so you can see that, by employing the Roseburgs—an elite magecraft family—and the Albrights—the kingdom’s only lineage of shamans—the royal family of Ridill has maintained a delicate power balance between local nobles and the Mages Guild.”

Monica and Cyril nodded along with Conrad’s explanation, their expressions serious. The club’s report appeared extremely well put together, even to

Monica, one of the Seven Sages. And above all, Conrad's skill at disseminating its contents was incredible. Even when he was explaining a familiar topic, there was always something new to discover.

They'd allowed themselves to become absorbed—and so neither of them noticed Felix standing in the doorway, his arms folded and a look of exasperation on his face.

"Monica I can understand," he murmured, sounding mildly annoyed, "but Cyril, too?"

With the exact same motion, Monica and Cyril whipped around.

"Eek! Pri-Pripri-Pri-Pripri—"

"P-Prince! What are you doing here?!"

Felix smiled and narrowed his eyes. "The two of you are quite in sync."

They both paled. They'd been so engrossed in Conrad's explanation that they hadn't noticed it was almost time to return to their dorms.

As they panicked, Claudia, who sat next to Cyril, looked up at the ceiling and laughed as if she was about to perish. "Oh, how can this be happening?" she murmured. "At last, a real prince has arrived... But when will *mine* come? How long must I wait?"

Felix shot Claudia a glance, then returned his gaze to Monica and Cyril. "Now, would you two care to explain why you've been wasting valuable time before the school festival?" he asked.

"Um, I, um—"

"Don't bother, Accountant Norton," Cyril interrupted. "I'll do the explaining."

Cyril fixed his posture and related the club's situation to Felix. The prince looked at the documents hung on the wall as he listened.

When the vice president eventually finished his explanation, Conrad seized the chance to close in on Felix. "Come, come, President! Take a seat right over here... Heh."

"No need," the prince replied. "I've already looked over everything you've

written. I don't require anything else." Apparently, he'd already taken in all the exhibit documents on the wall. Maintaining his regal smile, he glanced between Monica and Cyril. "More importantly, may I ask what you two thought after seeing these papers?"

"Um, they're very well summarized...", Monica offered. "And, um, I'd like many more people to get the chance to see them."

"They helped me deepen my understanding of the royal family," Cyril explained. "As Serendia Academy counts royalty among its students, I believe it is quite suitable subject matter for an exhibit."

Felix nodded at each of their remarks, then turned to face Conrad again. "President Conrad Askam. Unfortunately, I cannot permit a change to your exhibit location or any additional funding."

Conrad's face visibly fell, and Monica's and Cyril's shoulders drooped.

The passion of the club's president and its two other members was more than evident in the materials they'd prepared for the festival. They'd probably spent a lot of time and effort working on them. Nevertheless, it was the student council managing the event, and they had to take prior achievements into consideration.

But the data are all so good, thought Monica. It hurt her that such wonderful research would be hidden away out of sight. She hung her head and bit her lip.

Meanwhile, Felix addressed everyone in the room. "But it *is* the student council's duty to support the students in their endeavors. So instead, I shall put you in contact with a person of great talent—one from our kingdom's famous Lineage of the Mediators."

Claudia, who had been lying against the back of the sofa like a corpse, straightened up and smiled.

* * *

"I understand the situation, sir," said Neil. He spoke in a clear tone, having been summoned by Felix.

Neil Clay Maywood was the officer of general affairs of the student council and rather short for his age. When he turned to face Conrad, who was on the

tall side, their height difference made Neil look like a child next to an adult.

This didn't stop Neil from addressing the other boy, however. "First, regarding your exhibit location. It cannot be changed. However, I don't see any issue with placing part of your research material in the free exhibit corner of Exhibit Room One—"

"Well, now, please wait a moment," Conrad interrupted, flustered. "There is only so much we can fit there..."

"Yes." Neil nodded, turning to the papers on the wall. "You'd only be able to display one of these in the free exhibit corner. You will need to condense your report and carefully select which information to use."

There were eight pieces of paper in the clubroom, each as large as the door. Condensing it all into a single sheet would be a monumental task.

Conrad still looked unhappy, so Neil smiled gently and made a suggestion. "Why don't you place a summary in the free exhibit corner, along with directions to come here for more details? We can hang a map in the hallway as well so that potential visitors don't lose their way." This proposal kept the clubroom as the main exhibit location but offered to guide visitors there—and Neil wasn't done. "Club President, your target audience is mainly those in the field of magecraft, correct?"

"W-well, yes, of course," replied Conrad.

"Then when such visitors register, we can hand them a small card directing them here. I believe that would be easiest. It can contain a simple map and an explanation of the nature of your research."

Conrad considered this. They may not have been able to change locations, but as long as people could see their research, the issue should be resolved.

But the club president still seemed unhappy about something. "As you can see," he persisted, "this clubroom doesn't have much wall space. It's not really geared toward hosting an exhibit..."

"Then why not move those shelves?" suggested Neil immediately, looking at the two rows of bookshelves along the left-hand wall. "The ones against the wall are bolted down, but you could turn the second row around, push it into

the first, and cover it all with a cloth. You could then use the cloth to hang more research materials and data, making it much easier to see everything. This way, the only extra material you'll need is some cloth."

The club members, including Conrad, all nodded, seeing what Neil was getting at.

Neil smiled and continued. "The theater club should have large pieces of cloth they don't need. It'll take several people to move the shelves, but you can ask their stagehands for help."

Proposing new ways of getting things done wasn't the only thing Neil excelled at—he had a clear sense of what was required and how to break up the work. That was why Conrad and the rest of the club accepted his suggestions so easily.

He'd pacified the club president without making any conciliations. It was a brilliant display of skill. Monica, at least, knew she'd never be able to manage something like that.

With the discussion mostly concluded, Monica nervously turned to Neil. "Lord Maywood, that was amazing," she said. "Um, how do you...negotiate so well?"

Neil's eyebrows lowered into a smile at Monica's honest praise. It was his usual, somewhat unsteady expression. "I learned from my father," he explained. "According to him, the most important thing in negotiations is to find out what's *not* negotiable for the other party."

For the magic history research club, that was having their data seen by as many people as possible. So Neil had suggested showing people the way here, without changing their actual exhibit location. He'd made it look easy, but Monica could tell it was an impressive feat.

As she continued to look at him in admiration, his face went a little red in embarrassment, and he looked down. "Um, I mean, compared to my father, I still have a long way to go."

Come to think of it, thought Monica, *Felix said Neil was from the "Lineage of the Mediators."* *Could it be his family is really famous?* Though Monica held the rank of count of magic—equivalent to a count—because of her status as one of

the Seven Sages, she wasn't familiar with the circumstances of the kingdom's nobles, political or otherwise.

Felix cut in, as if in answer to her question. "House Maywood is well-known for producing talented mediators and arbitrators over generations. Neil's father, Baron Maywood, is considered one of the best, even among the aristocracy."

"That's right..., " murmured Claudia. She was suddenly behind Monica; she must have stood up and walked over. "House Ashley is known as the Lineage of the Wise and House Maywood as the Lineage of the Mediators. The two of us together are invincible. Don't you agree?"

"You haven't even done anything," muttered Cyril, scowling.

Claudia countered with a beautiful smile. "Oh?" she replied. "And who was it who found himself so easily swept up, just like Monica here?"

Cyril groaned, then shut his mouth and looked away. Monica wasn't sure, but she thought she saw a hint of depression in his profile... *Is Lord Cyril all right?* she wondered idly. Was he bothered by how easily Conrad had swayed him? If so, then Monica was just as guilty—in fact, she'd been the first to fall.

Before she could ask him, though, Conrad rubbed his hands together and drew up to Claudia, giving another breathy laugh. "By the way, regarding the matter of having Lady Claudia present our research—"

"I firmly, resolutely, and unequivocally *refuse*," she said.

Conrad was taken aback. "Oh, but onstage, your beauty would draw the attention of all, and your intellect is a national treasure," he lamented with a mournful expression. "If only you were there, a legitimate successor of the Lineage of the Wise, just think how many guests we would attract..."

Suddenly Conrad looked up, as if he'd just remembered something. For some reason, he turned to Cyril, but the student council vice president didn't say anything; he simply looked down.

Conrad immediately straightened up and offered Cyril a deep bow. "I'm terribly sorry," he said. "In any case, I would like to accept Officer Maywood's suggestions and continue preparing for the exhibit."



It seemed the issue had been resolved. As Monica breathed a sigh of relief, Claudia slithered up to Neil and coiled her arms around him.

“Is my fiancé not a wonder to behold?”

As she rubbed his soft, wavy hair, the beautiful noble girl’s lips turned up in a wicked grin.

* * *

Claudia Ashley first met Neil Clay Maywood when she was twelve years old.

A descendant of the Lineage of the Wise, Claudia had filled every bit of her spare time with reading for as long as she could remember. The adults who saw her would all say she was a lover of books, but in truth, she didn’t particularly like reading. It wasn’t a hobby for her. When a person got hungry, they ate. When Claudia didn’t know something, she read a book about it. It was that simple.

And yet, those around her never looked things up for themselves. Whenever a matter arose, they would simply rely on someone from the Lineage of the Wise. The things they came to ask her about were all easily learned if they’d only open a book. But that didn’t matter to them; nobody wanted to do the research themselves. They only wanted answers. Every one of them thought of House Ashley as a family of walking libraries and nothing more.

In particular, she *hated* being thanked. Those who asked her for something and thanked her would keep coming back—one thing after another. So Claudia decided to adopt a gloomy, miserable demeanor to try and stave off any would-be inquirers. In fact, she was *so* gloomy, you’d think her family had just died.

The results were spectacular. Nobody wanted to get close to her anymore, and she finally had enough peace and quiet to simply be alone and read.

And Claudia was fully satisfied with that.

One day, a friend of her father’s—a man by the name of Baron Maywood—visited their estate with his son.

Baron Maywood was a plain man who looked quite young considering he was near Claudia’s father’s age. His clothing was neat and tidy but not extravagant. Though he was a baron, he must not have been too wealthy. Judging by his

unsteady smile, he seemed like a friendly person, but not terribly clever.

“I’ve brought my son along today. Go on, Neil. Introduce yourself,” he said, urging the short boy to speak.

The boy, who had been waiting behind his father, smiled bashfully and said, “Hello. My name is Neil Clay Maywood. It’s an honor to meet you.”

He had very straightforward eyes. While he didn’t look much older than ten, he was apparently twelve, just like Claudia. It seemed youthfulness ran in the family.

After being shown to the parlor, Baron Maywood talked for a while with Claudia’s father, Marquess Highown. Their conversation had to do with mediating between the Mages Guild and the Noble Assembly. Apparently, the Mages Guild was advocating to lift the ban on healing magecraft.

Baron Maywood’s job would be to mediate a conference between the two parties. While the man was a noble himself, a mediator’s role was to avoid taking sides, to be fair and impartial, and to guide both parties to a solution everyone was happy with.

“Should we choose to permit healing magecraft, we may indeed save many lives,” said Baron Maywood. “That much is clear. However, I believe it’s still too soon to do so. Healing magecraft requires maturity and competition in the field of medicine as well as that of magecraft... But our kingdom’s medicinal technology can hardly be called *mature*.”

Marquess Highown nodded deeply. “I agree,” he said. “Some areas are still overrun with so-called doctors who do nothing but conform to superstitions to comfort their patients. Should we permit healing magecraft now, people may start to conflate the two.”

“I also think we need more testing on what harm mana can cause the human body...,” added the baron. “The data coming out of the Mages Guild is still insufficient.”

“You’re not wrong there. I think we need to raise and nurture a group of people skilled in both medicine and magecraft. One day, that can evolve into healing magecraft...but right now, we don’t even have a foundation for it.

Instead, we should focus on cultivating that foundation.”

As Claudia quietly listened to the adults speak, Baron Maywood looked over to her. Then he lowered his eyebrows into a silly grin. “I’m sorry,” he said. “This must not be very interesting for you.”

“Oh, but it’s very interesting...,” said Claudia. “It’s easy to see there will be a conflict between the mages, who wish to lift the restriction on healing magecraft despite a lack of data, and the Noble Assembly, which is worried that combining medicine and magecraft will divert the benefits currently held by the Physicians Guild to the mages.”

Baron Maywood’s eyes widened slightly, but he didn’t seem particularly offended. In fact, he offered her a gentle smile. “You’re a clever young lady. And you’re right. Which is why we must be all the more careful in finding a solution.”

Neil, sitting next to Baron Maywood, gaped at her in surprise. She wondered how much the baby-faced boy understood. *Actually, I doubt he understood any of it*, she thought to herself.

In a low voice, her father issued a command. “Claudia, would you give Neil a tour of the estate?”

Her father probably didn’t think she was bored by the conversation, either; this must be a sign they were about to discuss things that were best not heard by children.

Claudia stood up without a word, and Neil, flustered, followed suit. “U-um, thank you!” he stammered.

“.....”

Claudia turned her back to Neil, then opened the door to the hallway.

“Is there anything you want to see?”

“Um, I’d like to see the gardens!”

“...Oh.”

It was unusual for someone to visit House Ashley, proudly known for its incredible wealth of books, and ask to see the gardens instead. *It’d be less*

trouble if he quietly read a book or something for a while, thought Claudia, bringing the boy to the gardens.

As they walked side by side, it struck her again just how young Neil looked. He was shorter than her, too. He certainly didn't appear to be the same age.

Neil noticed her observant gaze, lowered his eyebrows, and smiled. It was a little unsteady, like his father's.

"You're really incredible, Lady Claudia," he said. "That conversation was hard to follow, but you knew exactly what was at the root of it."

"....."

"I hadn't considered possible ulterior motives on the Noble Assembly's part. I didn't realize the Physicians Guild and the Noble Assembly had such a strong connection," he continued. "My father brought me here as part of my studies, but I guess I still have a long way to go."

Apparently, the boy *had* been listening to their fathers' discussion.

Neil folded his arms and made a difficult face, groaning in thought. "I wonder if there was any data showing a clear link between the two. The current head of the Physicians Guild is... Wait, who is it...?"

He struggled with one question after another but never asked Claudia any of them.

She couldn't help but comment. "Aren't you going to ask me?"

"Huh?"

"I'm from the Lineage of the Wise. I'm smart enough to answer most of your questions." In truth, Claudia knew the answer to *all* the questions he'd mentioned.

But after thinking for a moment, Neil shook his head firmly. "No, I'll look it all up when I get home. Father always says that when I don't know something, I should look it up first. If I try my best and still don't understand, *then* I can ask someone."

"...I see."

“Oh, um, I’m sorry! You said you’d answer my questions, but I...”

Claudia had *not* said that. She’d only said she knew the answers. Still, this boy was obviously kindhearted and seemed to have interpreted her comment as an expression of goodwill.

“I’ll make sure to do tons of research when I get home,” he said. “If I still don’t understand after that, then you can tell me.”

Claudia didn’t say yes or no—she didn’t say anything. But it wasn’t out of a desire to tease the boy. She was simply unsure how to respond.

If she coldly refused to tell him, he’d probably never come to her again. For some reason, she didn’t want that to happen.

Claudia silently opened a door and headed straight down a well-maintained path. “These are the gardens,” she said.

“Wow!” exclaimed Neil. “Look at all the medicinal herbs!”

Both decorative flowers and medicinal herbs were planted in the estate’s gardens; it was about half and half. Claudia’s father had cultivated the latter to make use of the knowledge he’d gained from books. He felt that expertise of this sort had worth only when put into practice.

“Look at this, Lady Claudia,” said Neil. “This plant can help heal cuts!”

“You must realize I know that already,” she shot back.

“Oh. Right.” He scratched his cheek, seeming embarrassed, then squatted down and reached for a few weeds growing just outside the flower bed. “Then do you know what these are?”

“They’re weeds.”

If he wanted, she could give him their scientific name and what regions they generally grew in.

But as she was thinking about this, Neil plucked up one of the weeds and bent both ends. He then brought the folded blade of grass to his mouth and blew through it. It made a high-pitched whistling sound.

“If you take a blade of this grass and bend it right here, you can make it into a

flute. Our shepherd does it all the time.”

“...I never knew that,” said Claudia softly.

Neil continued happily blowing his grass flute. The sound rippled clean and clear through the blue sky above.

As soon as Baron Maywood and his son left the estate, Claudia made a demand of her father.

“Father,” she said, “I am going to marry Neil.”

Marquess Highown didn’t act surprised or scold her for the sudden remark. Instead, he gazed right back at her. “Neil is their eldest son and heir, so he cannot be adopted into this family by marriage,” he explained. But just as she thought he was about to deny her, he fiddled with his beard and said softly, “But I could adopt a son to inherit the family.”

Claudia’s mother had passed away soon after her daughter’s birth, and her father had never remarried. At the moment, Claudia was Marquess Highown’s only direct heir.

Her father was right—if Marquess Highown adopted a son as heir to the family line, Claudia would be free to marry whomever she wanted. She was fairly certain, however, that her father would prefer to adopt her husband as his heir.

“...So you won’t refuse me?”

“I’m not surprised you like him,” he replied, mulling it over. There was a strangely personal note to his words. Apparently they *both* had a weakness for the Maywoods.

Her father said nothing about the Lineage of the Wise’s bloodline dying out. He knew that it wasn’t their blood that left knowledge behind but their memories.

Marquess Highown removed several documents from his desk and said, “Shall we make arrangements for an adoption, then? It can be a distant relation, so long as he desires to improve his station.”

This was how Claudia and Neil became engaged and how Cyril—thirteen at

the time—was adopted to carry on the family line.

* * *

A day after the kerfuffle with the magic history research club, Claudia received an invitation to a tea party from someone surprising. The organizer was Cyril Ashley, Claudia's adopted older brother.

Cyril wasn't the type to throw tea parties, especially three days before the school festival, when he must have been extremely busy. And neither he nor Claudia was the type to indulge in a nice chat over tea. To sum it up, this was a secret meeting in the guise of a tea party.

As she sat in the seat prepared for her, Claudia pulled a sour face to make sure her brother knew this was the *last* thing she wanted to be doing. "Are you here to complain about yesterday?" she asked.

"No," said Cyril flatly.

Claudia narrowed her eyes a little. "You're strangely calm," she noted. "I had assumed Conrad Askam's words were still bothering you."

The previous day, Conrad Askam—leader of the magic history research club—had referred to Claudia as "a legitimate successor of the Lineage of the Wise" and then shot an awkward look at Cyril. The discomfort was because he knew Cyril wasn't Marquess Highown's biological son and that his stores of knowledge were nothing compared to Claudia's.

"I've no quarrel with Club President Askam, nor am I bothered by anything he said," stated Cyril firmly. "I have only my own lack of motivation to blame for not being able to proudly claim membership in the Lineage of the Wise."

He didn't seem upset, at least. *Why did he call me here, then?* wondered Claudia, staring at him in silence.

Eventually, Cyril broached the issue, looking displeased. "I have something to ask of you."

Claudia, though she kept it out of her expression, was actually surprised. Her foster brother had a lot of pride, and he almost never asked her for anything.

"This is unusual," she remarked. "You always want others to depend on you, and yet now you're depending on me... What is it you'd like me to do?"

“I want you to lend me a dress.”

Claudia went still and silent, her cup of black tea raised halfway to her lips. She held this pose for a solid ten seconds. Cyril’s own expression tensed as he met her utterly unblinking gaze.

After stoking her brother’s discomfort, Claudia spoke in a monotone. “I wasn’t aware you were interested in dressing up like a girl.”

Cyril’s eyebrows flew up in rage. He looked ready to yell, but he managed to restrain himself, quell his emotions, and say quietly, “Why are you assuming I’m going to wear it?”

“Oh, but don’t you know? A short while back, we had a secret vote here at the academy about who was best suited for the role of the school festival play’s heroine, Amelia.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

Considering his reaction, he must not have heard. Claudia let the edges of her lips curl up slowly. “First place was Student Council Secretary Bridget Greyham.” She paused for effect. “And second place was you.”

“Wh... What?!”

Amelia, the first queen of Ridill, was an imperious, proud, and beautiful woman. Yes, a *woman*. And yet it seemed that her brother, voted second most suitable to play her, was completely unaware of how good he would look in a lady’s dress.

“Incidentally, I came in third,” she continued. “Placing near the top of such a silly vote brings me no joy, but seeing your name next to mine was so funny that I couldn’t stop laughing.” She laughed again now, beautiful and indiscreet.

Cyril stared at her, his jaw on the floor. She could tease him until the cows came home, but she didn’t want to drag out this useless conversation. Withdrawing her casual smile, she got back on track. “So why *did* you ask me to lend you a dress?”

“Well, it’s... actually for Accountant Norton.”

Accountant Norton. Monica Norton. Claudia wasn’t very surprised to hear this

name. Whenever her prideful foster brother wanted something from her, it usually had to do with Monica. In fact, just a few weeks ago, when Monica was mixed up in the falling lumber incident, he'd asked Claudia to take her back to the girls' dorm.

"Considering her circumstances and personality, it's highly likely she doesn't own a dress to wear to the post-festival ball," he explained. "I was wondering if you could talk to her and lend her one, without...well, without mentioning my name."

"....."

When Claudia maintained her silence, Cyril's eyes began to drift, and he quickly started babbling. "I, er, I know it's rude for a man to say anything about a woman's clothes, but if Accountant Norton shows up to the ball in her school uniform, she'll embarrass the student council—and by extension the prince. Since I'm his right-hand man, it's only natural I would want to make the required arrangements in advance to protect his pride, so—"

"If it's her dress you're worried about, I hear she's borrowing one from a classmate."

At that, Cyril quickly shut his mouth. He was obviously relieved. *So easy to read*, she thought.

"I see. Then I suppose there's no issue."

"And a half second's thought would tell you Monica wouldn't fit into my dresses anyway," she continued. "They'd look much better on *you*, in fact."

"....."

Claudia was tall, and Monica was short. Their height difference was significant. The slender Cyril, while male, was much closer to Claudia's size than the other girl.

Cyril was self-conscious about his skinny stature and pursed his lips in annoyance. He took a sugar cube from the pot and plopped it in his tea as a distraction, then hurriedly dropped in another and then another. He clearly wasn't counting them.

“I had wondered,” said Claudia, “what would drive my prideful brother to request something of me... Hmm. I see.”

“Like I said, this is to ensure the school festival goes smoothly—”

“You must *really* want to see Monica in a dress.”

Cyril dropped the next sugar cube into his cup from higher up, causing droplets of black tea to splash onto the saucer. He very nearly dropped in his spoon, too, as he glared furiously at his sister.

“Student council members *must* set the standard for all other students,” he insisted. “I am only trying to make the necessary arrangements in advance...”

Claudia had no interest in her brother’s excuses, so she decided not to respond and simply took a few bites of biscuit. But as her thoughts turned toward the ball, she remembered something. “Oh, that’s right,” she said. “About Neil...”

“What does Officer Maywood have to do with this?”

“Is there something wrong with me bringing up my fiancé? I’d like to know if he will be busy on the day of the festival again this year.”

“Of *course* he will.”

I thought as much, mused Claudia silently. Felix had the most work in the spotlight, since he had to greet guests and the like, but the busiest one behind the scenes was Neil, the officer of general affairs.

He’d be overseeing the equipment and facilities and arranging the catering, *and* he’d need to be on hand to help if any trouble arose. Plus, he’d be in close contact with all the club leaders, sharing any information with his fellow student council members. He had a lot to do.

Claudia lowered her long eyelashes and breathed a mournful sigh. “Then I suppose Neil won’t be preparing a floral decoration for me this year, either.”

“A floral decoration?” repeated Cyril. “Oh, that...”

At Serendia Academy, there was a tradition where boys gave girls floral accessories to wear during the school festival. When a boy did this, it meant he wanted the recipient’s first dance at the ball. And if the girl wore the

adornment, it meant she accepted.

Such gifts were often designed with flowers or ribbons in a color matching the giver's eyes or hair, so those in the know could easily guess who they were from. It wasn't a compulsory event, however, and most of the students who participated were already engaged.

"I wasn't able to dance with him at last year's ball," complained Claudia.

"Officer Maywood is very busy, after all."

"He didn't even give me a floral decoration."

"So what? That's just a silly game anyway."

Claudia frowned scornfully at her brother. "...You clearly don't understand the workings of a woman's heart, *dearest elder brother*."

Cyril, annoyed, fell silent.

Claudia murmured her next words almost without moving her lips. "Any woman who doesn't receive one is treated as an unwanted leftover."

"That's just your imagination," replied Cyril. "Men, at least, don't look at women like that—"

"That's right. Men may not, but women are always reading into things and judging one another. Underhanded, don't you think?"

Cyril flinched away from the chill seeping into her voice. "But you... Didn't you receive at least ten last year?"

Despite Claudia's engagement to Neil, an endless number of people every year would insist that *they* were a better fit for her. Anyone who wanted talented, beautiful children would give an arm and a leg for someone with Claudia's incredible appearance and intellect. That was how much attention the Lineage of the Wise received in this kingdom.

The moment the school festival began, those who considered themselves more suitable than the plain son of a baron would all crowd around her with floral decorations.

But what did that matter?

“You know I’d never take flowers from anyone but Neil,” said Claudia, shooting him a withering look. She didn’t appreciate him making her say aloud something they both knew so well.

Cyril took a sip from his tea to distract from the uncomfortable silence that followed. He chose his next words carefully. “Officer Maywood is faithful and sincere. If he didn’t give you a floral decoration, then he must truly have been too busy to dance with you that day.”

It wasn’t hard to imagine Neil being concerned that promising her a dance he might miss would be rude. Claudia understood this.

“Mm,” she said, absently gazing outside with her lapis eyes. “You know, I don’t particularly like or dislike you...”

“Why are you bringing *that* up now?”

“But I *do* rather like how accurate your impression of Neil is.”

Cyril sniffed, showing his usual arrogance “Anyone who can’t see Officer Maywood’s talent must be utterly blind.”

“You are quite right,” said Claudia mildly, bringing her cup back to her lips.

As he sat across from his adoptive younger sister, Cyril Ashley was thinking about a different girl—the very one stoking his apprehensions, Student Council Accountant Monica Norton.

Would *she* want someone to give her a floral decoration? Would she be sad if she didn’t receive one?

No, knowing Accountant Norton, she probably doesn’t want to dance at all.

Monica was a disaster when it came to ballroom dancing—or even just being in front of others. She’d never enjoy a ball. He was sure his fears were unfounded.

Convinced, he drank the rest of his *very* sugary black tea. Cyril might have a sweet tooth, but even *he* couldn’t help wincing when it hit his tongue.



CHAPTER 2

The Purple One Who Desires Love

Under a pleasant, clear blue sky, a man was walking along a path colored by autumn leaves. He was slender and lanky, with the hood of his robe pulled down over his eyes and a long staff gripped in his hand. He used the staff for support as he trudged to a shaded area by the roadside. The way he walked was like a slug—bent at the waist, dragging his feet behind him.

“Ahh, ahhhh, I can finally see it...Serendia Academy.”

The man’s heavy steps came to a stop. Slowly, he raised his hooded head. There it was, just past a wooded area: a school building so beautiful one might mistake it for a palace. Despite the distance, he could make out its splendid structure.

Gazing at the academy building from afar, the man’s already pale face whitened further. “Radiance to blind the eyes... And you’re telling me that’s a school?! Damn. Damn, it’s going to blind me... I hate you, I hate you, I hate you... Anyone who attends such a radiant school must be well loved, well raised... Ahhh, I envy you, I envy you, I envy you—I curse you, I curse you, I curse you...”

The man continued to curse everything he saw, his face twisted with loathing.

* * *

“The school festival is only a day away,” remarked Isabelle Norton, daughter of Count Kerbeck and Monica’s collaborator on her top-secret mission.

Isabelle returned her teacup to her saucer. It was the night before the festival, and Monica had paid her a visit to discuss how she would protect Felix without revealing her identity.

Others from House Norton would be attending as guests to support them, but generally speaking, only Monica could act as the prince’s bodyguard. He was incredibly sharp and insightful, so he’d likely notice if a servant from House Norton tried to step in.

Instead, Isabelle and the others would simply keep watch nearby for anyone suspicious and help maintain Monica's cover.

"My father won't be able to make it," continued Isabelle. "But my mother will be attending in his place."

"Your mother?" repeated Monica.

"Yes, and she'll be bringing several talented servants with her as well," Isabelle explained with a nod. She glanced at her maidservant, Agatha, who proceeded to retrieve a floor plan of Serendia Academy and spread it out on the desk.

Isabelle used her fan to point to the four structures in the plan. "Broadly speaking, you can break Serendia Academy up into four buildings: the advanced building, the intermediate building, the library, and the grand hall used for balls and ceremonies. Students can generally enter and exit any of these, but the hardest for you to keep an eye on and most conspicuous for you to enter is the intermediate building."

Both the advanced and intermediate courses shared use of the library and the grand hall, so Monica could easily move between these without appearing unnatural. But since she was part of the advanced course, entering the intermediate building would make her stick out like a sore thumb. Inevitably, she wouldn't be able to keep as close an eye on it. She wasn't too concerned during normal school days, but a lot of outsiders would be going in and out during the festival—if possible, she wanted to make sure it was secure.

"So House Norton will keep watch near the intermediate building instead," said Isabelle. "Prince Felix won't have his eye on it, either, and reducing the number of places you need to worry about should make your job easier."

Monica was incredibly grateful for the offer. Louis and Ryn would be helping her out on the day as well, but there were still too few of them to properly guard the prince.

"Th-thank you, Lady Isabelle!" she mustered. "That really helps... But, um..." One thing bothered her. "Won't people find it strange for your family to be in the intermediate building? You're in the advanced course, after all..."

“Oh, that will be no problem at all. You needn’t worry,” Isabelle assured her. Then she paused, pounding her fist into her palm like she’d just remembered something. “Ah, yes, and another thing. My sister, we must decide on secret signals so we can communicate should the need arise!”

“Signals?” repeated Monica.

“That’s right,” said Isabelle with a nod, putting her fan to her chin in thought. “If you should need help from me... Yes, then you can touch your left ear. If you do so, either I or someone from House Norton will move to assist.”

Monica nodded. “Um, okay...”

Isabelle put a hand to her cheek and gave a chuckle. “I read a novel recently, and it had a scene where two partners used hand signals. Hee-hee, *partners*... What a wonderful word...”

Apparently, this book was her new favorite. It was a story about two wandering knights who solved problems wherever they traveled. She looked entranced as she said the word *partners*.

“To tell you the truth,” she continued, “I would love to enjoy the festival with you normally, but today we are partners! I’ll be your perfect backup. You can count on me for support!”

Though Isabelle’s excitement was a little intimidating, Monica genuinely felt she could rely on the other girl. *It’s so reassuring to have allies...*, she thought. Though a well-known truth, this was a fresh sentiment for Monica.

“Thank you so much,” she said with a bow.

* * *

The morning of the school festival, Monica woke up earlier than usual. It was still mostly dark outside—a little pink seeping into the nighttime indigo to the east.

It was late autumn, and the air was chilly against her skin. She groped about for Nero’s warmth. She expected him to be nestled somewhere under the covers, but the black cat was nowhere to be found.

“...Nero?”

As she sat up, a beautiful woman in a maid's outfit bowed to her. She'd been quietly waiting in the room's corner. "Good morning, Silent Witch," she said.

Rynzbelfeid—nicknamed Ryn—was a high wind spirit contracted to Monica's colleague, the Barrier Mage Louis Miller. She had been staying with Monica in her attic room for a few days to help with pre-festival security.

Having a maid greet her as soon as she woke up was a strange feeling for someone raised as a commoner. "Good morning," she replied, looking around the room. Still no sign of Nero. "Um, Miss Ryn...", she ventured. "Where's Nero?"

"Sir Black Cat left a short while ago for a morning walk."

She called it a walk, but he was most likely patrolling. That made sense.

Ryn gazed straight at Monica. The spirit's facial expressions almost never changed, but Monica could somehow tell that she wanted to ask a question.

"I have heard," said the maid, "that Sir Black Cat is your familiar."

"U-um, right..." Monica nodded vaguely.

Ryn continued in a flat tone. "The Starseer Witch's familiar, Sir Owl, is not able to speak in human tongues or to take on a human appearance. Sir Black Cat must be a familiar of great talent."

"Th-that's just the kind of familiar he is..." Monica started to sweat. Was Ryn trying to pry into Nero's background?

But the spirit simply said, "I see, my lady," and left it at that.

"Um, Miss Ryn?" asked Monica. "...About Nero's human form..."

"I am keeping that a secret from Lord Louis, my lady," the maid assured her. "As I have heard that Sir Black Cat is something of a trump card for you." Ryn put a hand to her chest and used the term again. "A *trump card*. How truly exciting. I eagerly await your trump card stylishly leaping into action to save you from trouble, my lady."

Monica would rather avoid trouble to begin with, and the idea of Ryn eagerly awaiting it gave her pause. That aside, it seemed she'd be able to avoid any further questions on the topic. Monica sighed in relief.

Just then, Ryn looked out the window. “Lord Louis calls for me. May I step out for a moment?”

Monica had never made a pact with a spirit before, but she knew that simple communication was possible between a mage and their bound spirit even over distances. Naturally, the communication wasn’t perfect; only the feeling was conveyed. Ryn merely sensed she had been summoned.

She could move incredibly fast, so a short absence wouldn’t be problematic. Monica nodded and asked, “Is Mr. Louis already nearby?”

“Yes, my lady,” replied the maid. “He stayed at an inn in Craeme last night.”

Craeme was where Monica had first met Glenn. It was the closest town to the academy, so quite a few of the festival guests would be staying there. Louis planned to blend into their ranks and simply walk through the school’s front door.

In general, you needed an invitation to get into the festival. Anyone with state authority, however, could make a request of the school in advance and was usually granted one.

“I’m surprised he applied for an invitation...,” murmured Monica.

Serendia Academy was under the control of Duke Clockford, the second prince’s guardian. Louis, however, was a proponent of the first prince. It wasn’t as though supporters of the second prince’s rivals were barred entry to the school festival, but even so, Monica could scarcely believe Louis’s audacity. It was honestly impressive.

Ryn picked a book off the desk and smoothly held it up. It was an adventure novel by Dustin Gunther that Monica had borrowed from the library for Nero to read. She sometimes saw Ryn and Nero looking through it together.

“This novel describes bold, daring people as having hair growing on their heart,” the maid explained. “I am certain that Lord Louis’s heart has a full mustache and beard.”

In fact, the Barrier Mage Louis Miller was such a bold man that one wondered if his heart was actually made of *steel*, rather than covered in hair. Monica was the exact opposite. She had the heart of a flea.

“In any case,” the maid continued, “I will return for a time to the hairy-hearted Lord Louis. Do you wish me to convey any messages?”

Driving the image of a heart covered in hair from her mind, Monica bowed to Ryn in thanks. “Please tell him that I’m happy to have his support today.”

“Very well, my lady.”

Ryn opened the window, then changed into a small yellow bird and flapped away. Monica leaned against the sill and watched her go, getting a nice lungful of the outside air and stretching.

Okay. I’m ready.

The morning air had woken her up quite a bit. After changing into her school uniform, she unlocked a certain drawer and opened it. Inside was a coffeepot—a memento of her father—as well as letters she’d received from Lana, the comb the two of them had bought together, the book written by her father that Felix—or rather Ike—had purchased for her a few days ago, and a peridot pendant. These were her treasures.

When she’d arrived at the academy, all she’d had was the coffeepot. Now the drawer held so much more, and it filled her heart with emotion. *I have so many more precious things now...*

Upon leaving her cabin in the mountains, Monica had been able to fit only a few necessities, her black cat Nero, and her father’s coffeepot into her luggage. Back then, that had been enough for her. There had been no other possessions she cared about.

But now she had a lot that she didn’t want to lose.

...I’ll protect them. I’m the Silent Witch, after all. I’m a Sage, she told herself before picking up her ribbon and comb and doing her hair. She’d had a lot of trouble at first styling it the way Lana had taught her, but after a while, her fingers had grown quite used to it.

She neatly tied her ribbon, then put the comb away and picked up the coffeepot. Breakfast was still a ways off, so she wanted to sit down and have a nice, relaxing cup of coffee.

But just then, she heard a knocking at her window; it was her black cat, Nero, tapping against the glass. Monica opened the window for him. The cat slipped lithely into the attic room and shivered from the cold, moaning. “It’s freezing out there. I nearly got frostbite... I wish I could hibernate,” he complained.

“You were patrolling the area, right? Thanks,” said Monica. “...Um, would you like some hot water?” Nero had nearly fainted from shock last time he tried coffee, so she suggested just the water instead.

Nero shook his little head. “Nah, I’m fine. More importantly, we’ve got a problem on our hands. A seriously crazy guy is very close to the academy right now.”

“Huh?”

Monica’s face tensed. *Someone suspicious is here already...?! And to make matters worse, Ryn had just left the school.* Monica clenched her fists, knowing she had to do something about this. “What did he look like?”

“Well, he was kinda purplish.”

“Purplish? Um, could you be more specific...?” *What about him was purple?* wondered Monica, confused.

Nero put his paw to his chin, pretending to stroke it. “He was, like, super depressing, y’know? He kept on muttering, ‘I curse you, I curse you.’ Oh, and he had a robe on just like the one you have, and a staff just like yours, too.”

“...Wait.”

A robe and staff similar to Monica’s? Purple? Immediately, a name bubbled up in her mind.

* * *

“Ahhh, what a disaster. Now morning has come... The morning sun is blinding, burning my eyes... The sun, the world—both so unkind to me... Someone, please love me, please tell me you love me... Yes, sometimes even I want to be loved by something other than the mold, the moss, and the mushrooms. I want to be told I’m loved... Ahhh, I want to be loved, I want to be loved, I want to be loved. All those who walk normally under the sun, I envy them, I hate them, I resent them. I curse them all, each and every one...”

In the woods near Serendia Academy, a figure sat curled up against a tree, wearing a hooded robe and clinging to a staff. Just as Nero said, this “seriously crazy guy” was incredibly disquieting, gloomy, and creepy. In short, he was the kind of person you wanted to stay away from.

The man, who looked a little over twenty, was lanky with a pallid face. His hair—unevenly cut—was visible from under his hood, clearly not maintained, and it was a shocking, vivid purple.

Monica, who had snuck out of her room, drew closer to the man, holding Nero to her chest. Hesitantly, she asked, “Sir? Are you the Abyss Shaman?”

The man froze where he was, under the shade of the tree. Slowly, he turned to look at Monica. His eyes were wide and colored pink like gemstones. He had a pattern—a shamanic seal—on his pallid face, specifically on his left cheek.

“You... You know me?” he stammered.

“You’re Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman, correct?” asked Monica nervously. “Um, what are you doing here...?”

The man visibly shuddered. A scarlet flush bloomed on his white face. “A... A girl? A girl knows who I am... And she called me by my name... Is she a fan? My fan? What a turn of events. To think the day would finally come when another would show me love.” A low, strange laugh escaped his lips. “I’m so glad to be alive...”

With an eerie smile and his jewel-like eyes gleaming, he closed the distance between them. “Please, I beg of you. Please tell me that you love me. Love me, love me, love me, love me...”

“Um,” said Monica. “I’m, well, the Silent Witch, another one of the Seven Sages...”

The man’s eyes widened at her words. He tilted his head to the side in confusion. “...The Silent Witch? Monica Everett?”

“Y-yes,” she stammered, nodding.

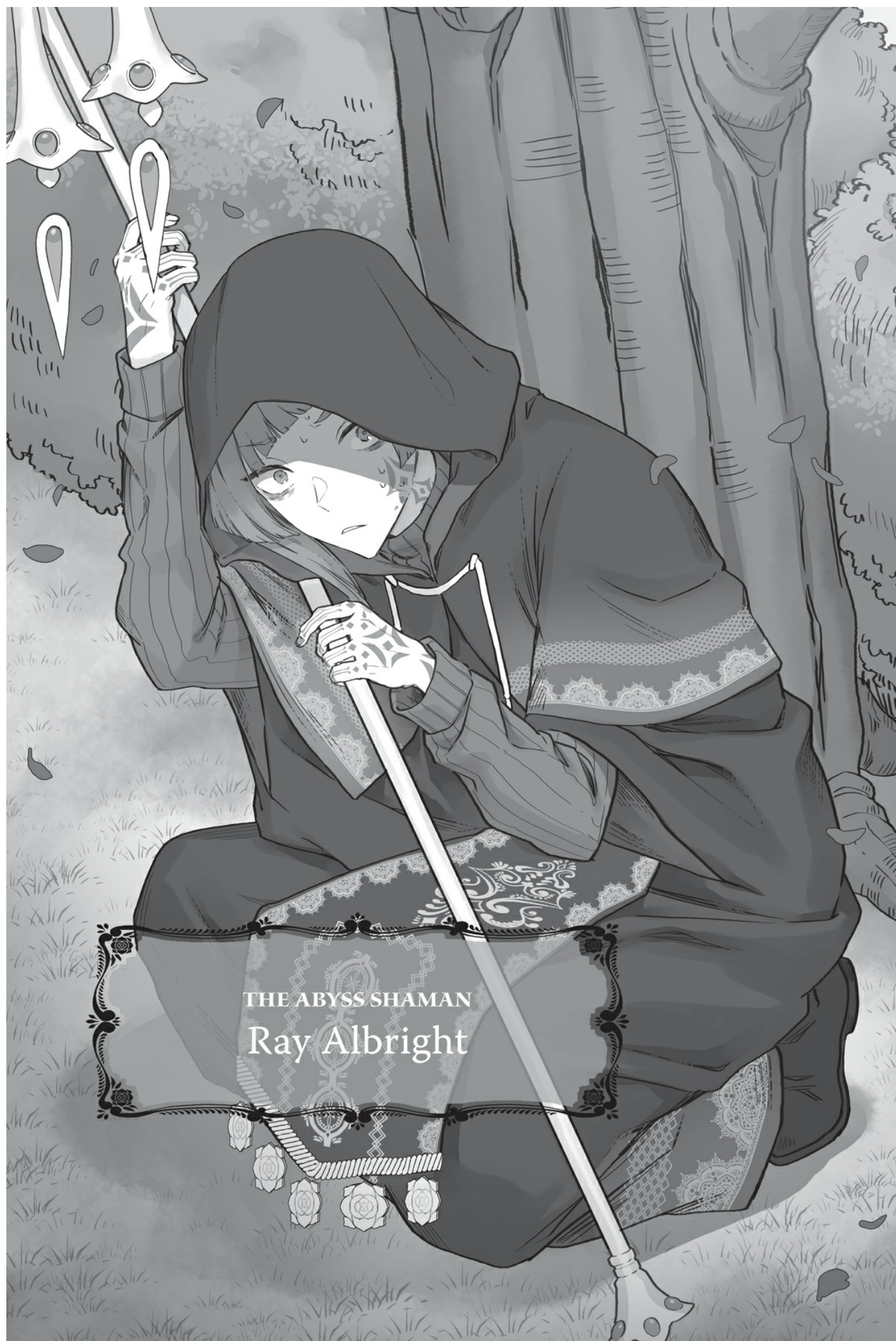
The man began to breathe heavily. A moment later, he was clinging to Monica, desperation evident on his face. “P-please help me! You have to help

me... Please! Pleeeeeease!”

“Hphryahaaahhhhh?!” yelped Monica out of sheer surprise at his reckless behavior. The two of them were Sages, but neither commanded a hint of dignity.

Nero, pretending to be a cat cradled in Monica’s arms, offered an exasperated “mrrrow.”

The third Abyss Shaman, Ray Albright, was one of the Seven Sages and the current head of House Albright, the kingdom’s only lineage of shamans. Titles for mages were given only to high mages, and to receive one, you had to either apply yourself or have enough achievements that the Mages Guild granted you one. Among the more distinguished families, however, people would inherit titles from family members. House Albright was one such example.



THE ABYSS SHAMAN
Ray Albright

The first Abyss Shaman was said to have invented more than a hundred shamanic spells—also known as curses—and engraved them into his own body. Much like how members of the royal family were fed trace amounts of poison from a young age to build up resistance, the first Abyss Shaman had trained his body to acquire resistance to shamanic spells.

These markings were in turn passed down to the next Abyss Shaman. Ray was the third to hold the title, and his body was engraved with more than two hundred spells, enough to cover every inch of his skin in cursed patterns.

A side effect of all these spells was dyschromatosis, which had turned his hair and eyes unnatural colors. Even in the vast lands of the Kingdom of Ridill, it was likely only those of House Albright who possessed purple hair and pink eyes.

Eventually, Ray seemed to calm down a little. He inspected Monica closely and asked, baffled, “Why is the Silent Witch wearing a Serendia Academy uniform...?”

It seemed her uniform was the main reason he hadn’t recognized her as a fellow Sage. Monica belatedly regretted not changing into something else to help keep her infiltration mission a secret. But Nero had said he found someone suspicious, so she’d burst out of her attic room still wearing her uniform.

Now... Now what? What do I do? thought Monica. *Um, I need an excuse. An excuse...*

But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t come up with anything besides claiming it was her hobby to walk around forests wearing school uniforms. Even she cringed at the thought of such a pitiful lie.

Still, it was all she had, and so she bet on that slim hope. “Um, the Serendia Academy uniforms...they’re really cute, huh? I wanted to try wearing one...so I dressed up like a student from the academy, and, um, I was taking a walk...”

Nero looked up at her in exasperation. She could see the question in his eyes: *Couldn’t you have picked a better excuse?*

As she stood there, so embarrassed she wished she could disappear, Ray muttered a follow-up question. “I heard the Silent Witch is like me and almost never goes out... And she supposedly lives far away in a cabin in the

mountains...”

“I was taking...um...a really long walk...?”

Monica knew well that the more the lies piled up, the faster they’d fall apart. *It’s over*, she thought, at a loss. She couldn’t possibly manage any more excuses. At this point, her only choice was to be honest with the man and ask for his help in her mission. *Waaahhh!* thought Monica, recalling Louis’s evil grin as tears formed in her eyes. *Mr. Louis is going to be so mad at meee...*

“Um, well...,” she said. “To tell the truth, the Barrier Mage gave me a mission, and I’m supposed to be protecting the second prince...”

“A bodyguard? You? The Silent Witch?”

“I-it’s top secret, so please don’t tell anyone else, okay? P-pleafhe!” she begged, quickly bowing her head.

There was no response. Nervously, she looked back up at Ray. For some reason, he seemed like he was in *ecstasy*.

“A girl revealed her secret to me... She asked me to help... I—I feel truly loved. Really, really loved...! Yes, this feels incredible... Heh-heh, heh-heh-heh-heh...”

From her arms, Nero whispered, low enough so that only she could hear, “Is this guy all right in the head?”

Quietly warning the cat not to be rude, Monica kept her eyes on Ray. He was holding his hands to his cheeks, smiling weirdly. His behavior concerned her, but for now, it seemed like he’d keep her secret.

“Um,” she went on. “What are you doing here? You asked me to help you a moment ago...”

“Yes! Yes, that’s right. I’m in a whole lot of trouble right now...” Ray trailed off, then set his gaze squarely on Monica, and made his plea. “This matter involves the continued existence of House Albright, so I want you to keep it a secret from others... I’ll keep your secret as well, so please...”

If a famous lineage like the shamans of House Albright was in danger, it probably involved some sort of misconduct on the part of a family member. Monica nodded stiffly, and Ray began mumbling his explanation.

“This is a rather old story, but ten years ago, one of House Albright’s apprentices turned traitor...”

The only ones permitted by the Kingdom of Ridill to dabble in shamanic spells and curses were the Albrights, Ray’s biological family. But there were plenty of people who conducted research on the topic on an individual basis without permission. Some of those people would then request apprenticeships with House Albright, since its members were unrivaled in the shamanic arts.

Outsiders would frequently be taken in, though they were required to marry into the family. This traitor must have originally been an outsider.

“Not only did they steal information related to House Albright’s spells, they took several shamanic tools created by the previous Abyss Shaman.”

He went on to explain that House Albright had quickly sent pursuers, but the traitor had hid himself so well that they’d been unable to find him.

“My family has been chasing this traitor for ten years now, but we were never able to find any leads... Recently, however, he’s started offloading the tools he stole, maybe because of financial issues. That was how we were finally able to start tracking him down.”

House Albright had secretly resumed its pursuit while retrieving the tools as the traitor disposed of them.

“...It seems one of those tools has ended up hidden somewhere in Serendia Academy.”

“Whaaa—?!” yelped Monica.

Shamanic tools resembled magical items, but they were mainly created for the purpose of causing someone suffering via a curse. They might seal away a person’s mana, restrict their actions, or bring about physical or mental disease... In other words, anyone who wanted one was undoubtedly up to no good.

If one of them was hidden in Serendia Academy, it was a major emergency.

“I wanted to get inside the school as a festivalgoer and quietly retrieve the tool, but... But... But...”

Ray’s breathing became labored, as though he was having some kind of fit. He

clutched at his robe, and his face twisted as he said bitterly, “But the whiteness of Serendia Academy’s uniforms has broken my spirit.”

Monica wasn’t sure how to respond.

Oblivious to her confusion, Ray clawed at his purple hair and started wailing hysterically. “White uniforms? White?! If I wore one, I would doubtless make a fool of myself... And yet people here wear them like it’s *nothing*. I just can’t understand how these people *think*. Ahhh, they’re so white it stings my eyes! I hate it... Damn, damn! I’ll curse them to spill tea on their sleeves and stain their shirts... I’ll curse them, I’ll curse them, I’ll curse them! But not the girls.”

“Ummm...”

“And the school itself is radiant... When the people in a space are radiant, does the air itself become radiant? Why, I would stand out like a sore thumb in such a radiant building. They would talk behind my back. Throw stones at me. Make me into a laughingstock. I know, I know exactly what they’d do... Ahhh, what a terrifying place this academy is... If I entered it, I would melt. Shriveled up like a slug stricken with salt—”

“Uh! Ummm...”

As Monica, flustered, tried to interrupt, Ray suddenly turned a pink-eyed glare on her, approached her once again, and begged. “So please... I’ll...I’ll do my absolute best to get inside that radiant academy... I’ll use every fiber of my being... So please, Silent Witch, help me get that tool back!”

* * *

Having accepted the Abyss Shaman’s request for help, Monica left Ray for the time being and carried Nero back to the girls’ dormitory. Ray, for his part, had been creeping toward the academy with a gait like a dying slug, wanting—in his own words—to get as close as he could by the start of the school festival.

And he was trying very hard, just as he’d declared he would. But at the rate he was going, he’d never even reach the school, much less start looking for his lost shamanic tool.

From Monica’s arms, Nero whispered seriously, “Man, it’s like the Seven Sages only accept total weirdos.”

“Haaah...” She couldn’t argue with that.

Monica’s pocket currently held a duplicate of a shamanic tool called the Crimson Wrath. Ray had given it to her, telling her to swap it for the real thing if she found it. The item was a necklace with a crimson jewel embedded into its decorative black frame.

I’ve never seen a student wearing something like this, thought Monica. *But it’s likely whoever took it has already begun to suffer side effects.*

The curse imbued on the item robbed a person of their peace of mind. Apparently, its wearer would experience extreme emotional fluctuations and show aggression toward others.

Since detection magecraft couldn’t easily locate shamanic items, they would just have to walk around the school looking for it. Monica had already told Ray she planned to contact Louis, explain the situation, and have him help with the search. The shaman had writhed in agony and grumbled about not wanting to be indebted to the man and how much he hated him and the whole situation. But ultimately, he’d reluctantly agreed. It was always best to have lots of help when searching for something.

But where in Serendia Academy could someone have hidden a cursed tool? According to Ray’s investigation, it had been pawned off as an ordinary secondhand accessory. After drifting here and there, it had eventually been purchased by someone from the school. *It looks like a necklace, so maybe I should check what the other girls are wearing...*

Monica had no choice but to go around looking at the female students’ accessories at the same time she watched over Felix. Jewel aside, the necklace’s black decorative frame was unique, so it would probably be easy to spot.

She thought all this over as she walked, and soon she was approaching the girls’ dormitory. It was still early in the morning—early enough that if the dorm master saw her, she’d be in for a scolding.

“Up you go, Nero,” she said.

“Oh? This again, eh?” the cat replied.

After putting Nero on her shoulder, Monica grabbed the broom she’d hidden

in the trees. It was just an ordinary broom—no magic in it or anything. She'd borrowed it from the storage closet just below the attic room where she slept.

Monica straddled the broom, then deployed an unchartered flight spell. The broom slowly floated into the air, carrying her with it.

"Back straight, binary rhythm, and balance, balance..."

She'd just learned flight magecraft, and she was still far from mastering it. Slow ascents like these actually made it harder for her to stay balanced than simply going straight ahead.

As Monica's head wobbled to and fro, Nero clung to her more tightly. "I don't like the look of this. You sure you're all right?"

"I-I'll be fine... *Wah-hyahhh?!'*"

"Hey! I'm gonna fall! *I'm gonna fall!*" yelled Nero as Monica's body careened to the left. Because she was leaning, they began to zigzag. Despite all this, she somehow reached the window of her attic room.

As her feet touched the floor, Monica dropped the broom and slumped over, moaning. "I didn't have as much trouble going down..."

"Even *that* was a wild ride," Nero pointed out scathingly. "I mean, it was a little hard to tell if we were flying or falling."

Monica sniffled in response.

As the little witch bobbed and wound her way through the early-morning skies, a maid watched her through opera glasses from the window of one of the girls' dorm rooms. After the young servant saw the little witch enter her attic room, she left the window and straightened up before reporting what she'd just witnessed to her master.

"There is no doubt about it," she said. "That was Lady Monica Norton, student council accountant."

"...I see," murmured a beautiful girl with glossy blond hair. She sat on a chair with her fan unfolded.

This was Bridget Greyham, student council secretary.

“Shall we barge into her room, Lady Bridget?” the maid asked.

“No,” the girl replied. “It isn’t yet time.”

Considered one of the three most beautiful girls at Serendia Academy, Bridget had brilliant features that called to mind large roses in full bloom. She covered her mouth with her fan and lowered her eyes in thought. Her fair eyelids covered her amber eyes as if to conceal what was on her mind. Long eyelashes cast shadows across her cheeks.

We should keep to passive observation for now, she thought.

Despite her famous lineage, Bridget was merely the daughter of a nobleman. There were limits to what she could do; she only had so many cards in her hand. She would have to proceed with caution.

I’m used to waiting, enduring. I’ve been doing it for ten years, after all.

She ground her teeth dully, tightening her grip on the fan. And as the one she loved most appeared behind her eyelids, she made a quiet oath to herself.

...Prince.

* * *

Cyril Ashley was the first to arrive at the student council room on the morning of the school festival. He started by checking over the plans for each of the other members. He wasn’t anxious about the schedule, per se, but he felt like he had to keep himself busy somehow or he’d never calm down.

My father will be here today as well, he thought to himself. I must be bold and dignified in my behavior so as not to bring shame on House Ashley.

Cyril had sent out two invitations to the school festival. The first was addressed to his foster father, Marquess Highown. The other...

...I wonder if she’ll come.

He looked out the window. Several carriages were already parked outside the school. He knew he wouldn’t be able to see much from this distance, but he nevertheless peeled his eyes for any sign of Marquess Highown’s emblem. That was when he heard the door open behind him.

The first ones to enter were the third-years: Felix, Elliott, and Bridget.

“Oh, hello, Cyril,” said Felix. “You’re early.”

“Good morning, Your Royal Highness,” replied Cyril, straightening up and bowing.

Elliott narrowed his droopy eyes into a mean grin. “Got up early like an idiot, I’m sure. Just like he does for every event.”

Nobody asked you, thought Cyril, shooting Elliott a scowl.

A few moments later, Neil and Monica entered. The former announced himself clearly, and the latter—as always—offered a much more nervous greeting. Cyril noticed the tension in Monica’s expression. He knew she had plenty to be anxious about—this was her first school festival. *As her senior, I’ll have to support her wherever I can*, he thought privately.

At this point, Bridget spoke up. “I, too, woke up early. The school festival only comes once a year, after all.” She gave a high-pitched “oh-ho-ho,” then shot a glance at Monica. “And speaking of waking up early, I happened to see Accountant Norton outside the girls’ dormitory this morning. I assume you were nervous as well and had trouble sleeping?”

“Hwah?!” yelped Monica, her lips trembling.

Bridget covered her mouth with her fan and narrowed her eyes. “What *were* you doing out so early, Accountant Norton?”

“Um, I was, well... This morning, I... I was outside, and, um...,” mumbled Monica, hanging her head and playing with her fingers, things she often did when she was panicking or anxious.

As Cyril followed the movements of her hands, Monica’s face shot back up.

“I... I was, um, practicing my dancing! In advance of, um, the ball!”

“I didn’t realize you were looking forward to the ball,” remarked Cyril without thinking.

Monica managed a crooked smile and nodded awkwardly. “Y-yeph! I, um, I’m looking forward to it!” She started moving through the steps of a dance—very clumsily.

Cyril didn’t let it show, but he was suddenly *very* disturbed. He’d been certain

the shy Monica wouldn't want to attend a ball with so many other people. But apparently, she'd borrowed a dress and even practiced her dancing in secret. Monica had been earnestly trying her best to improve on her weak points, while he'd callously assumed she wasn't interested. Cyril felt ashamed of himself.

...Why do I feel so awful inside?

Monica continued showing off her miserable footwork. It really was disastrous. She'd been a little better back when he'd instructed her.

Oh. I see.

Cyril then realized the true nature of the uneasy feeling in his chest.

If Monica showed up and danced like *that*, she'd embarrass the student council. He must be anxious—that was why his heart felt so strange just now. Of course. There was no doubt about it. And that meant there was a very simple solution.

If the prince or I take the lead, her dancing will improve... And I can't bother the prince with something like this, so it's only appropriate I look after her.

If Monica, shy as she was, was confronting the ball with this much sincerity, then it was his responsibility as her senior to help. Once he reached this conclusion, the discomfort in his chest melted away.

While Cyril was lost in thought, Felix smiled gently at Monica. "Yes, this is your first student festival," he commented. "I hope you have a lot of fun."

Monica cut short her stomping and nodded vigorously. "Y-yes, sir! I'll, um, I'll have fun!" Her braid wagged up and down like the tail of a dog.

"Then it's finally time for the school festival to begin in earnest," Felix announced.

Everyone present straightened up. Serendia Academy's festival was a major event. The kingdom's most influential nobles and even ambassadors from foreign nations would be in attendance. Failure was not an option.

Everyone said, "Yes, sir," in unison. Cyril in particular stuck out his chest and spoke from his belly.

He vowed to do everything in his power for the sake of the prince he so loved

and respected—and for his juniors.

After their morning meeting in the student council room, Cyril quickly left the school building and headed for the gardening club's exhibit space in the inner courtyard.

Its members were busy putting together displays of mixed flowers and trading comments on their roses. Several pots rested on the exhibit stand. The potted roses in particular had turned out wonderfully; they had a wide range of autumn varieties on display, including some with powerful scents and strangely shaped petals.

Cyril called out to the club's president as she carried out the final checks and made a sincere request of her. "I'm sorry to ask you for something like this so suddenly," he said, pausing for a moment. "But might you be able to give me a rose?"

Most of the gardening club's members, including its president, were girls, and Cyril's request drew a lot of attention. They all knew what giving someone a rose during the school festival meant.

But the ever-serious Cyril thought they were making a fuss because his request had been rude. "Well, I understand you put a lot of time and care into raising these roses..." he said, looking guilty.

The president's eyes practically glittered. "No, by all means!" she insisted. "Please, yes, take one with you! Which rose would you like?"

Thanking her politely, Cyril looked over the roses in the garden. On the whole, autumn roses in Ridill were frequently deep of hue, but he got the feeling something a little less attention-grabbing would be a better fit for *her*.

A light pink, perhaps, or a light orange... He swept his eyes over the selection before stopping on one rose in particular—its flower was pure white.

His gut told him that was the one.

"I'll take the white rose, then, if you please."

The girls all immediately squealed in excitement.



CHAPTER 3

That's Why You'll Always Be My Rival

After the morning meeting was over, the president of the student council, Felix Arc Ridill, was left alone in the council room. He looked out the window.

Outside was a garden full of unusual varieties of rose, a gorgeous fountain made by a famous craftsman, and beautiful buildings with intricate designs extending even into the details of the pillars. This academy was the epitome of luxury—all of it a display of his grandfather Duke Clockford's authority.

"Come, Wildianu."

In response to his voice, a white lizard—the spirit Wildianu—peeked his head out of Felix's pocket. Felix scooped the creature onto his finger, then held him up to give him a good view of the scenery outside.

"It seems we have more guests than last year," Wildianu commented.

"Indeed," replied Felix mildly.

Graduates of Serendia Academy had an advantage when it came to working in the royal court. Nearby nations understood that, and in recent years, more students had been traveling abroad to study here. At this point, diplomatic exchange was one of the school's primary offerings.

I want to forge as many connections with our neighbors as possible today. We have those negotiations with the Kingdom of Farfolia coming up, after all.

A great many people would be attending the festival, including Ridillian nobles, wealthy merchants, temple staff, and ambassadors from nearby nations. And through the splendor of the day's event, they would learn the second prince's name: Felix Arc Ridill.

"What say we answer His Excellency's expectations?" said Felix in a smooth, singsong voice. He continued, the words doubling as a personal vow, "To engrave the name 'Felix Arc Ridill' into everyone's memory."

The bell announcing the start of the festival rang out across a clear sky. As he

listened to its high, proud tones, the prince left the student council room behind him.

* * *

As the bell sounded, the academy's front gates opened. One after another, people dressed in the garb of high society alighted from their parked carriages and passed through. Watching from a window in the school building, Monica clenched her hands nervously.

It's finally started...

When Monica thought of school festivals, she thought of students busily rushing around back at Minerva's Mage Training Institution. Monica was always a part of the hustle and bustle, too—though in her case, she was fleeing from pursuing teachers demanding she present her research.

The atmosphere at Serendia Academy that day was completely different, however; this school was attended by noble children, after all. The main events for this festival were exhibitions, research presentations, singing, performances, and theater, but the behind-the-scenes tasks and odd jobs would be handled by servants and hired craftsmen.

So, aside from those performing or presenting, the students had quite a bit of free time. They could choose to spend it with visiting family, or if they had an eye on posts in the royal court, they could devote their time to boosting their reputation.

Monica—who didn't belong to either group—mentally went over her objectives for the day. *I need to protect the prince and recover the shamanic tool... Mr. Louis should arrive soon, so I can meet up with him and discuss the tool.*

The issue of the House Albright traitor and the cursed tool concerned not only a noble family but the prestige of the Seven Sages. Rather than have Ryn convey the message, it would be best for Monica to speak with Louis directly. Nero and Ryn were already in their cat and bird forms, Nero standing by on the roof and Ryn in a tree.

“...Miss Ryn, can you hear me?” murmured Monica into the empty classroom.

“Yes, my lady,” came the immediate response, directly into her ears. As a wind spirit, Ryn could detect even a whisper, and she could deliver her own voice straight into the ears of others. She’d be the center of their communication network.

“Is Mr. Louis...?” Monica asked hesitantly.

“He’s just made it through reception.”

“I have something important to discuss, so I want to meet him behind the school building.”

“Understood. I will tell him.”

Before even a minute had passed, Ryn’s voice returned. *“I was able to contact Lord Louis. He will go to the rear garden right away and wait for you there.”*

“All right. I’ll head there immediately. In the meantime, please keep watch over the prince.”

“Understood, my lady.”

Her talk with Ryn over, Monica left the empty classroom and started toward the meeting point.

The problem will be swapping the real item with the fake once I find it... She hummed in thought as she walked down the halls.

Just then, a baritone voice rang out. “Lady Monica! Lady Monica Norton!”

Monica stopped at the sound of her name, and when she saw who it was, her eyes went as wide as they possibly could.

A well-built, black-haired young man in a black uniform—that of the Temple-Affiliated University—was rushing toward her. It was none other than Robert Winkel, a first-year student in the University’s advanced course, and the one she’d played at the chess competition the other day. He was also the one who had proposed marriage to her for the sake of playing more chess.

Generally speaking, you needed an invitation to attend Serendia Academy’s school festival. Nobody without one was allowed in. How was he even here?

As Monica stood there agape, Robert carefully peered at her face, then

noded, seeming convinced of something. “I knew it. It *is* you, Lady Monica. You look different from the last time we met, so I was afraid I had the wrong person.”

Now that he mentioned it, she *had* been wearing makeup and a different hairstyle on the day of the competition. It was only natural Robert would be surprised—he’d never seen her in her natural state.

“But your outfit today looks every bit as neat and tidy, in my opinion.”

“Um, thank you...,” said Monica, awkwardly smiling and backing away.

But for every step back she took, Robert took a bigger one forward. “I was so desperate to meet you that I talked my teacher into letting me accompany him.”

Monica remembered then that teachers from nearby schools had also been invited. Belatedly, she realized there was a chance that some familiar faces from Minerva’s might also be in attendance, and the color drained from her face.

I knew I should have had Lana do my makeup...! she thought.

Lana had promised she’d help her get dressed and do her makeup before the ball that night, so Monica had felt too guilty to *also* ask her to help figure out her appearance for the first part of the day. Now, though, she regretted her choice.

As she panicked internally, Robert took yet another step forward. They were a little too close for two recent acquaintances speaking to each other, and Monica began to tremble. She felt like a cornered animal.

“Have you given any thought to what we discussed the other day?”

“Th-the other day...?” she stammered.

“My proposal.”

Naturally, she hadn’t given it even a moment’s thought. On the day of the chess competition, she’d been too preoccupied by her run-in with Bernie and protecting Felix. In all honesty, she’d nearly forgotten Robert even existed.

“Um, so, I’m not really, ummm...”

“If there’s anything you’re dissatisfied with, please don’t hesitate to tell me. If it’s within my power, I will deal with it. I’ll pour my entire heart and soul into making you happy.”

She couldn’t tell him she was one of the Seven Sages working undercover and thus engagement was out of the question... So instead she just stammered.

Robert continued earnestly pressing his case. “I have never seen anyone who plays chess like you. And according to Mr. Redding, you only started recently. That means you must have so much room to grow... Will you aim for greater heights at my side?”

Monica enjoyed chess, but only insofar as it was one of her electives. She didn’t plan to dedicate her life to it.

“I—I, um... Well...”

What could she say to get Robert to back down? She got the feeling that it didn’t matter what she said—he’d probably be able to out-debate her anyway.

The nervousness and confusion caused her to pale. She teared up. She knew Robert only had good intentions, but he was still intimidating, and that made him *terrifying* for Monica.

Sh-should I...call for help...?

If she asked Ryn or Nero, maybe they’d put on those flamboyant outfits like before and run to her side. Or maybe she could use her hand sign and Isabelle would take care of it in true villainess style.

But Robert wasn’t an assassin after Felix’s life. The issue of his pressing her for an engagement was separate from her assignment to protect the prince. She’d have to solve this one herself.

Monica had raised her left hand halfway when she stopped and lowered it again. If she touched her left ear, that would be the sign for Isabelle to help. But she didn’t want to bother her collaborator with a personal problem like this.

Finally, she squeezed out a few words from her wheezing throat.

“I...I can’t...get engaged.”

Her voice was so weak, it might as well have been made by an insect, and

Robert opened his mouth again to argue his point.

But before he could, a clear, ringing voice cut him off. “Robert Winkel,” it said. “Professor Redding is by the front gate looking for you. Stay with your chaperone—don’t wander off.”

Monica, her back now completely straight, turned around out of reflex. She saw someone rush over, his silver hair tied in the back and swaying to and fro—it was Cyril Ashley.

After wedging himself between Robert and Monica, he cast Robert a cold glare. “Accountant Norton is a member of our student council, and the school festival is a very busy time for her. If this is a personal matter, I must ask you to come back another day.”

“I see,” said Robert. “I apologize. I had no idea.”

Robert’s way of doing things inconvenienced Monica, but he seemed serious and earnest at heart. He gave in surprisingly easily at Cyril’s admonishment, then said, “I’ll see you again,” and hurried away.

Monica heaved a sigh of relief as she watched him go. If Cyril hadn’t been beside her, she would have collapsed to her knees on the spot. Instead, she took several deep breaths to calm herself and looked up at Cyril.

“U-um, Lord Cyril, I...”

Cyril turned a quiet stare on her. He looked somehow unhappy. Monica shrank back despite herself. He was probably angry because she’d caused him trouble.

“I-I’m sorry! I know you’re busy, and I didn’t mean to...to...”

“.....”

Cyril remained silent, frowning as he watched Monica.

She began restlessly fidgeting with her fingers. Just then, he brought his right hand from behind his back and held it out to her. In his palm was a white rose.

Monica looked back and forth between it and Cyril until he suddenly made a face like he’d just realized something.

“Oh no. The ribbon...,” he muttered, pulling the ribbon tie from around his neck. The broach he was using to fasten it was a magic item. He was afflicted with mana hyperabsorption and never went without it. He smoothly slipped the item into his pocket.

Then he tied the blue ribbon—the color of which signified his academic year—onto the now thornless stem of the white rose, fastened it with a pin, and handed it to Monica.

“Put this on somewhere.”

“A...flower? I think I’ve seen other people wearing them, too...”

Monica had been seeing mostly female students wearing floral decorations in their hair or on their lapels. Was this some sort of festival event?

When Monica gazed in bafflement at the white rose, Cyril looked surprised. “Wait, you don’t know about the floral decorations?” he asked.

“Is it some sort of event?”

“...Never mind. It’s fine,” said Cyril bluntly to the confused Monica. But his eyes were drifting, looking restlessly down at his feet.

Monica looked wide-eyed at the uncharacteristically fidgety Cyril. He brought his slender chin back up sharply, like he always did, and pointed at the rose.



“It’s a good-luck charm. If you wear it, you won’t embarrass yourself today. Make sure you keep it on at the ball, too.”

“Th-there’s a...a charm like that?!” Monica looked down with admiration at the floral ornament. She didn’t see any magical formulae embedded in it. That meant it wasn’t the kind of charm or curse that was imbued with magecraft. It must be related to some custom or local superstition.

She didn’t know what meaning this flower held, but apparently, if she wore it, she wouldn’t embarrass herself for the rest of the day. As she examined it closely, the gentle aroma wafting from the white rose brought a small smile to her face.

It’s so pretty...

This might be a charm, but it was the first time anyone had ever given her a flower.

“Thank you for the pretty flower, Lord Cyril.” A crooked smile formed on Monica’s face.

Cyril’s own lips turned upward, and he nodded in satisfaction. “Well then, I have business to attend to, so I must be leaving. If anything should happen, tell me or one of the other student council members immediately. But try not to burden the prince with any more work!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Leaving her with a very Cyril-like scolding, he hurried away.

Monica looked down at the white rose in her hand. *Um, should I fasten it to my bolero?* she wondered. She pinned it there, her fingers uncertain. The white rose imparted just the right amount of extra brilliance to her richly colored bolero.

Up until a little while ago, she wouldn’t have cared about some groundless good-luck charm. Now, for some reason, it filled her with confidence.

I’ll do my best to help the festival succeed.

Robert had really worn her out, but now she could feel a little bit of energy coming back to her. After expelling a puff of air from her nose, she began to

walk toward the rear garden.

First, I have to meet up with Mr. Louis.

She went down to the first floor, where the hallways were already bustling with guests. Before, she would have cringed at the crowd and run away. But Monica had recently experienced an even livelier festival.

The festival in Corlaption had so many more people.

The crowd still made her nervous, but not so nervous she couldn't move. Spurring herself onward, she was just about to turn a corner when someone grabbed her arm from behind.

"Hold on a minute."

The low, stifled voice was familiar. She'd never forget it. She sucked in her breath and slowly turned around.

Grabbing her arm was a bespectacled young man with wavy blond hair—the boy she'd broken off her friendship with during the chess competition. It was Bernie Jones, son of Count Ambard.

"Bernie...", said Monica in a hoarse voice.

Bernie kept his eyes forward and spoke quickly. "Mr. Rutherford is that way. You don't want him finding you, right?"

"Huh?"

Professor Gideon Rutherford worked at Minerva's Mage Training Institution. He'd been Monica's teacher when she was a student there, and he'd done a lot for her. Nicknamed the Mage of Violet Smoke, he was an elderly professor with wild eyebrows who always carried a long-stemmed pipe. He was the very man who had recommended Monica to the Seven Sages.

If this was a simple social engagement, she'd want to go say hello. But considering her current undercover mission, it would be a disaster if he saw her.

Monica peeked around the corner and saw an old man in a robe a short distance away. Despite his age, he stood up straight, both his short-cut white hair and bushy eyebrows the same as she remembered them.

It really is Mr. Rutherford... Monica ducked back behind the wall and glanced up at Bernie.

The young man sighed and shrugged. “Let’s go somewhere else. This is no place to stand and talk. Unless...you’d rather not see my face anymore?” he suggested with a sardonic grin.

Monica wasn’t going to wither beneath her former friend’s mean-spirited attitude any longer. “No,” she said. “I had, um, something to tell you, too.”

“...I see,” Bernie said and went quiet. His gaze told her to lead the way.

“Follow me,” she said, walking. He trailed after her in silence. They didn’t speak at all.

During her days at Minerva’s, they’d walked the halls side by side, trading casual conversation. But this was their relationship now—this distance, and their eyes that wouldn’t meet.

That made Monica a little sad, but the pain in her chest it used to cause was gone.

* * *

Monica took Bernie to an empty classroom on the first floor. This one would be cordoned off for the duration of the festival, so there was no need to worry about anyone interrupting.

“Did you come here with a teacher from Minerva’s?” she asked, thinking he’d probably tagged along with a professor like Robert.

But Bernie shook his head. “I came alone. After what happened, the only Minerva’s attendee this year is Mr. Rutherford.”

During the chess competition, an infiltrator had harmed a teacher from Minerva’s. Apparently, the other school was in turmoil over Eugene Pitman’s death. It was no wonder their teachers had abandoned any plans to attend. Professor Rutherford—the only one who came—was a powerful, fearless combatant. He was probably here to gather intel and trade information about the incident.

“Wait,” said Monica, “but if you’re not with Mr. Rutherford, how did you get an invitation?”

“Don’t you remember who I am? I come from House Jones. The school would never turn down an application from one of *us*.”

“Oh, um, I see...”

She didn’t have much of a grasp on the details, but Bernie’s family was apparently one of the top aristocratic houses in Ridill. It was a source of pride for him; during her days as a student, she’d always hear him saying things like, “Well, *I* come from House Jones, so...”

As she reminisced, Bernie pressed her further, his words somewhat rushed. “But anyway, you said you had something to say to me, right? Knowing you, I bet you’re about to ask why I covered for you.”

“...Yes.”

After Monica defeated the assassin disguised as Eugene Pitman, Bernie had lied and said he was responsible. That way, her identity wouldn’t be exposed. And he’d just helped her again, stopping her from bumping into Professor Rutherford. Thanks to him, nobody had found out about her, and she was able to stay at Serendia Academy.

Bernie has no reason to cover for me...

His answer came smoothly and quickly, as though he’d prepared it in advance. “At first, I was suspicious about why you were here. I thought it was just another one of the Sages’ games—fooling around, pretending to be a student. But when I realized the second prince was here, and after witnessing an intruder in the school, it’s only natural to assume you were dispatched to protect him.”

He looked at her for an answer, and Monica gave a small nod. The mission was top secret, but she couldn’t lie to him at this point.

“If you’re here on Seven Sages business protecting the prince, then as a noble of the Kingdom of Ridill, it’s my responsibility to aid you, isn’t it? That’s the only reason I covered for you, O great and mighty Sage.”

He hadn’t helped Monica as a friend—he’d helped a Sage out of his responsibility as a noble. On that point, he was very insistent.

Monica fell silent. He peered into her face and grinned cruelly. “Convinced *now*, Sage?”

Bernie certainly didn’t see her as a friend anymore. He stressed that point stubbornly and repeatedly. Almost like he was trying to convince himself. Any words Monica had for him as a friend wouldn’t reach his ears anymore.

But there was one more thing Monica needed to ask him. “You don’t have to answer this if, um, you don’t want to, but...”

“Oh? What is it? As a member of House Jones, I will of course obey the command of a Sage,” he replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Monica closed her eyes for a moment. Then she opened them again and looked straight at Bernie. “Why did you take part in the chess competition?”

All expression faded from his face.

Ever since they’d reunited, she couldn’t help thinking it was strange. When Monica attended Minerva’s, Bernie had always ridiculed chess as an idle man’s sport and insisted mastering magecraft was a much more worthy pursuit. So when she’d spotted him at the competition, she’d been surprised—surprised to see him again but also surprised because he was there to play *chess*.

Bernie made a sour face, like she’d struck a nerve, and Monica grew anxious. Maybe she’d just said something very cruel—maybe she’d hurt him. “Um, if you don’t want to answer, you don’t have to. I’m sorry for asking something so strang—”

“I’m dropping out of Minerva’s soon.”

“Huh?” Monica froze, her mouth hanging open. Shocked, she looked up at him and saw an exhausted smile, full of resignation.

“My older brother died in an accident last month,” he continued. “And no, it wasn’t a conspiracy or an assassination. Despite his awful riding skills, he got cocky and went for a long journey, then fell from his horse and broke his neck... A fittingly stupid death for a stupid man.”

Monica didn’t know the details of Bernie’s family situation. But she had heard that he was the second son of Count Ambard and that his older brother would

inherit the title. Bernie, unable to inherit, had poured everything into studying at Minerva's so he could become a Sage and attain the rank of count of magic, making him equal to a normal count.

But now that Bernie's brother was dead, he would be the one to inherit.

"Bernie, are you, um, giving up on becoming a Sage?"

"Yes. Come winter, I'm going back home to focus on my studies to become the next count. I went along with the others to the chess competition to have a little fun in the meantime."

No one had paid attention to him as a second son, and so he had burned with anger and a need for recognition. He'd funneled those emotions into hard work and given his blood, sweat, and tears to earn the kind of grades that would make others notice him.

Monica wondered how he'd felt when it all came crashing down.

Ever since he was young, he'd hopelessly wished to inherit. But to have the status he'd longed for fall into his lap like this couldn't have made him very happy.

And yet she saw no anger or distress on his face.

"To be honest," he said, "I'm relieved. Now I can give up my dream of becoming a Sage." Monica was at a loss for words. Bernie continued wearily, almost murmuring to himself. "Deep down, I'd given up on it a long time ago."

Monica found that hard to believe. Bernie was a hard worker, and he had talent. Nobody doubted that he'd become a first-rate mage one day.

"Is it...my fault?" she said, her voice scratchy.

Bernie turned a spiritless, derisive smile on her. But was he ridiculing the foolish Monica, himself...or both of them?

"Yes. It *is* your fault. When you used unchanted magecraft, I saw the impossible gap in our talents... It was a rude awakening. It would have been for anyone. Knowing that I'd never reach you, I'd never be your equal..." A dry laugh. Behind his glasses, his eyes swiveled to look at Monica again. "And yet you kept smiling at me like that, so innocently... It felt like you were making fun

of me.”

No matter how many words of hatred and loathing he threw at her now, there was no spirit in his voice. He’d already given up on the future he’d been striving for—on becoming a Sage.

“You kept on calling me your friend—but I never wanted to be your friend.”

Monica had also given up—on expecting anything from him. But to hear him reject the days they’d spent studying together still stung. She hung her head.

“I wanted to be your rival,” he said. “Your equal.”

Monica blinked, then slowly looked up.

When he saw her idiotic expression, he gave one of his usual mean-spirited snorts. “Well, I *am* talented. One day, I will be known far and wide as the greatest Count Ambard to ever live. And since I’ll be a count, we’ll be the same rank—won’t we, Count of Magic Everett?”

“Huh? Um? Oh, well... Yes.” Monica faltered in the face of this sudden change in attitude but managed a nod.

Bernie folded his arms and laughed haughtily. “One day, I’ll be a capable count. And when that happens, I expect you to rely on me—with that same pitiful look on your face.”

Bernie delivered this line like a storybook villain and turned his back on her, as if to say they had nothing further to discuss.

Monica and Bernie would probably never go back to being friends. But not *everything* had been lost. She was sure a new relationship could sprout, even from the remains of their ruined friendship.

She lowered her head to Bernie as he left and spoke a few words as the Silent Witch. “...I sincerely thank you for your aid on this mission, Lord Bernie Jones, son of Count Ambard.”

Bernie twisted around to look back at her and grinned. She knew that expression. It was the smile he always flashed Monica when she went crying to him for help, and he’d sigh and say, “Oh, fine.”

“That’s right,” he replied. “You’d better keep thanking me for the rest of your

life.”



CHAPTER 4

A Dazzling Family of Villains

After parting ways with Bernie and arriving in the rear garden, Monica found the Barrier Mage Louis Miller already leaning against a wall, waiting for her.

“You’re quite late, my fellow Sage,” he said.

“I’m sorry! Some things, um, happened...”

Louis was neatly dressed in his official Seven Sages robe, his staff in hand.

Coming in such obvious attire was probably meant as a deterrent. With one of the kingdom’s best mages present, and specifically one specializing in barrier techniques, any intruders would find it difficult to act.

“But, um... Is this okay?” she ventured. “His Majesty said to protect the prince, well, in secret, right?”

That was why Louis had originally sent the prince a magic item fitted with a defensive barrier, and why he’d sent Monica here as a student. And yet now he was boldly barging right into the academy.

As she wondered about this, Louis chuckled nasally. “It’s perfectly fine. I was officially invited to the festival, after all.”

Monica had assumed he’d applied for an invitation from the school, like Bernie, but apparently not. He was one of the more social members of the Seven Sages, so he probably had connections.

“In any case, my fellow Sage, you must have something important to discuss if you had to call me here, yes?”

Oh, right, she thought. I have to tell him about exposing my secret mission to the Abyss Shaman!

She looked down and played with her fingers before softly stammering her response. “Well, um, the Abyss Shaman, well, he’s near the academy, and...”

“Huh?” Louis furrowed his brow at the mention of a fellow Sage. “That shaman is just as much of a shut-in as *you*. I’m shocked he’s out and about. I

figured he'd shrivel up like a prune if the sunlight touched him."

He hadn't shriveled up, but he *had* been making a fuss about the sunlight. So Louis was essentially right.

"My undercover mission, um...he found out about it! I'm...I'm really sorry!"

Louis's eyebrow twitched, but he didn't intimidate or threaten her. "What is his reason for coming all the way here?"

"Well, apparently one of House Albright's shamanic tools...um, it ended up at Serendia Academy, so..."

After an abridged explanation of the Crimson Wrath, how it stole people's peace of mind and how it wound up at the school, Louis lowered his gaze and put a hand to his mouth in thought. "Then we have a rather troublesome situation on our hands."

"...Yes."

"But this is also the perfect chance to put the Albrights in our debt. Let's recover the item and have the Abyss Shaman help with protecting the prince while we're at it."

Monica was relieved; whatever the case, Louis wasn't mad at her. Still, she found his boldness impressive. He was trying to gain favor with the Albrights even in a situation like this.

Recalling Ryn's words about hair-covered hearts, Monica made her other report. "There's one more thing I need to tell you, Mr. Louis..."

"Is it worse than a shamanic tool winding up at the academy?"

"Mr. Rutherford—er, from Minerva's—is at the festival."

"Geh!"

Louis's speech was usually pompous and affected, but just now he'd croaked like a frog being stepped on. He grimaced, his displeasure obvious.

But there was a good reason even this hairy-hearted man was so ruffled. Professor Gideon Rutherford was Louis's master.

"That old geezer...er, my master... He's here...?"

Monica had belonged to Professor Rutherford's laboratory, but he hadn't actually instructed her. He'd simply let her do her own research. He wasn't her master, just a former teacher. Louis, on the other hand, had learned about magical combat from him directly, and thus respected the man as his master.

Louis seemed to anguish over this news for a moment or two, but eventually he steeled himself and came to a decision. "Understood," he said lowly. "I'll draw his attention. You take advantage of his distraction to..."

"Okay."

"...to use unchanted magecraft to kill him on the spot, and then we'll bury him." His eyes were serious.

"Um...what...?"

"My apologies. I lost my cool." Louis took a slow breath and regained his normal, confident attitude. Then, something seemed to dawn on him, and he abruptly looked toward the faculty room. "Come to think of it, Mr. Macragan is here as well, isn't he? And yet you say he hasn't realized who you are."

"Y-yes."

Professor Macragan, who taught fundamental magecraft at Serendia Academy, was formerly a teacher at Minerva's, and Monica had been one of his students there. But his eyesight was poor, and for the moment, it didn't seem like he'd figured out she was the Silent Witch.

"How convenient. My master is old friends with Mr. Macragan... With both of them in the same place, they're sure to have a long, protracted conversation over tea. We should try and orchestrate a meeting."

Louis placed his hands on Monica's thin shoulders. He had on his usual smile, but she thought his eyes looked a little bloodshot.

"So while I'm distracting my master... You get that shamanic tool back. *Before* I run out of patience."

"...Y-yes, sir."

Monica was too afraid to ask what would happen if his patience ran out.

* * *

According to Ray, the Crimson Wrath had been sold to someone at the academy. Significantly, he hadn't given the family name of any one student, only the name of the school itself.

That meant it was likely the buyer wasn't an individual student. One of the clubs had probably purchased it for the school festival, and there were only so many clubs that would need an accessory like that.

As student council accountant, Monica looked over the names and prices of all items being purchased, so she had a good guess as to where it might be. *I'm almost certain...it will be part of a costume for the play.*

In about an hour, students would put on a play using the outdoor stage. Flowery, gorgeous plays were the highlight of the festival. She'd heard the costumes would be just as elaborate and impressive as everything else.

The issue was how to go about checking them—and how she'd switch the real item with the fake once she found it.

Well, for now...I'll hurry to the dressing room. If I don't get there soon, they'll start changing!

Monica rushed off. But just as she turned a corner in the hallway, she spotted one of her classmates—Lana—coming toward her. As usual, she sported a complex hairstyle and cute accessories. When she noticed Monica, she waved and ran over.

"Monica! I've been looking for you! ...Oh, what's that?" She looked at the white-rose decoration on Monica's chest, then narrowed her eyes meaningfully—though what the gesture meant, Monica couldn't guess. "Huh," she mumbled. "Hmm. I see."

"...? What's the matter?" asked Monica, confused.

Lana put a hand to her mouth and giggled in delight. "I'll get you looking nice and pretty for the ball. Look forward to it!"

Monica nodded vaguely, unable to follow. But then she remembered something. Lana was involved with the play's costumes. Maybe she'd know about the accessory.

“Lana!” she cried, leaning forward. Her voice came out louder than she’d intended.

Lana’s eyes widened in surprise. “Wh-what? Why are you yelling?”

“Um, well, the costumes for today’s play... Is a, um, necklace with a red jewel part of any of them? With a black decorative frame and...” Monica trailed off, worried whether that would be enough explanation.

Lana nodded easily. “That would be Queen Amelia’s necklace. What about it?”

She knew Lana would remember. She remembered *everything* when it came to clothes. *So the shamanic tool will be worn by the person playing Amelia...* If Monica was going to swap them out, she’d have to move now—before the play started.

“Lana, um...have the actors started changing into their costumes yet?”

“Oh, they’re already finished.”

“Huh?! B-but there’s still an hour left!”

Lana sighed at Monica’s shock. “There’s *only* an hour left. Of course they’re already finished. They don’t have to put on just their costumes—they have to do their makeup and hair. Especially the one playing the queen. She’ll take the longest.”

Monica barely needed any time to dress herself in the morning, so she hadn’t even considered that. Highborn girls took a long time to get ready. Especially if they were going onstage.

The queen’s actress is already wearing it... I have to hurry and get it back!

“Hey, Monica,” said Lana. “My father’s carriage is going to arrive soon, so I wanted to go out and greet him. Would you like to come with me? I want to introduce him to you.”

Apparently, that was why Lana had been looking for her. Unfortunately, Monica had a very important mission to attend to. “Um, I’m sorry. I actually have something to do...”

“Student council work? Will it be done by the time the play starts?”

Monica gave a little nod—she knew Lana wanted to watch it with her.

“...Yeah. I’ll make sure it is,” she said, half to herself, before quietly clenching her gloved fists. Lana had supervised the costumes, and Monica knew exactly how much she was looking forward to the play.

I won’t let it be ruined, she told herself.

Getting the item back before the curtains rose—that was her current mission as the Silent Witch, Monica Everett.

...Or so Monica told herself as she headed for the play’s green room. But just as she was about to knock on the door, she stopped short. There was still one problem.

I know where it is now, but how do I make the switch? Ask her to take it off so I can see it for a moment? But I’m not part of the play or anything, so if I barge in and say something like that, they’ll just be suspicious... And besides, I don’t know who’s playing the queen, so what should I do...?

Nero and Ryn were protecting Felix while she retrieved the item, so she couldn’t ask them for help. Louis was busy holding Mr. Rutherford at bay. Monica was going to have to figure this one out herself.

As she racked her brain, her collaborator’s words came to mind.

“Today we are partners! I’ll be your perfect backup. You can count on me for support!”

If she wanted Isabelle’s help, she only had to touch her left ear. Her left hand reached up unconsciously, but she held it down with her right. *I can’t. This involves Albright family secrets. I can’t tell Lady Isabelle about it.*

The only time she could rely on Isabelle was if her identity was about to be revealed while she was guarding the prince. She couldn’t ask her for anything else.

What should I do...?

Monica broke out into a cold sweat.

With her unchanted magecraft, Monica could shoot down dragons without saying a word. But when it came to negotiating, she was completely powerless.

If someone had asked the *old* Monica to do this, she'd have started crying and run away, thinking it impossible. Now, at least, she could rally herself. She knew she had to do *something* to get the dangerous item back.

But she couldn't get any further than that. There was a problem before her she needed to solve, and she had no idea where to begin.

As the words *what should I do?* swirled around and around in her head, time continued to pass. At this rate, the play would start.

What should I do, what should I do, what should I do...? she thought, standing there at a loss.

Then she heard the sharp click of a heel behind her—and the sound of something flapping open. She knew that sound. Someone had flipped open a folding fan.

“Ohhh-ho-ho-ho!”

At this confident, high-pitched laugh, Monica whipped around to look behind her. And there she was—the self-professed villainess, Isabelle Norton, smiling with her fan spread out before her.

“L-Lady...Isabelle...,” Monica stammered.

Isabelle brushed back her orange curls and, in an arrogant tone befitting a villainess, said, “What in the world are you *doing*, hanging about a place like this? You're meant to carry my things, remember? Come along, now!”

She twirled back around, but not before giving Monica a little wink. From anyone else's point of view, it would look like a mean-spirited young lady was bossing around a weak-willed little girl. But to Monica, Isabelle's slender back as she walked in front of her was the most reliable thing she could imagine.

Once they'd moved to a hallway where guests were not allowed, Isabelle withdrew her evil smile and meekly bowed to Monica.

“I'm sorry for acting out, dear sister,” she said. “It just...seemed like you were troubled by something.”

She had probably seen Monica raise her left hand, then push it back down, realized she was wondering whether to ask for help, and called out to her.

“A villainess mustn’t let weakened prey out of her grasp, after all.”

And so, this reliable villainess had secretly reached out a helping hand to a vulnerable young lady.

“Lady Isabelle, I... Well...”

As Monica wondered whether she should explain the situation, Isabelle shook her head to indicate that no further words were necessary. “It is fine if you can’t tell me what’s happening,” she said. “We may not be able to assist you, but we can listen. However small your worries or big your troubles... We all want to help.”

I’m so lucky to have her, thought Monica. Whenever she was in a pinch or she found herself stopping, unsure of what to do, a hand would always reach out to help. She was beyond grateful.

Swearing that she would never forget Isabelle’s goodwill or any of the kindness others had shown her, Monica slowly began.

“I can’t tell you the details, but... The actress for Queen Amelia is wearing a necklace that is actually very dangerous. I’d like to secretly switch it with this fake.” She took the duplicate necklace out of her pocket.

Isabelle gave it a close look, then nodded. “Ah, I understand... Agatha!”

She received an immediate reply from the maid, who had been keeping an eye out to make sure nobody was listening. “Yes, my lady?”

“Bring a ruby necklace here from my room. The one from Anmel with the small diamonds surrounding the gem.” Isabelle delivered these instructions quickly before looking at Monica with a smile. It was a firm, reliable smile, one of the sweetest she’d ever seen. “You can leave it in our hands, my sister! I will resolve this issue in a dazzling manner befitting a villainess!”

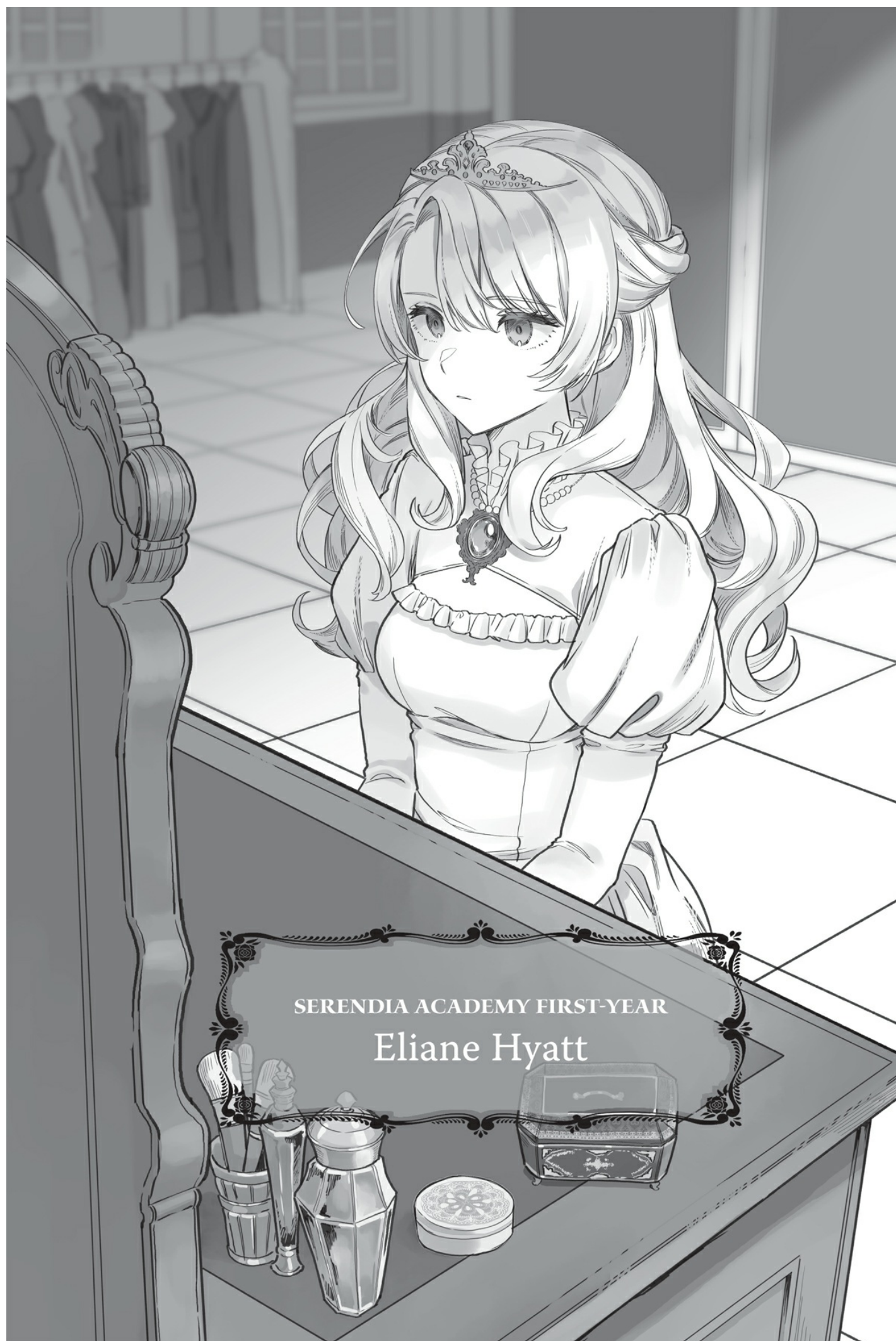
* * *

Less than an hour remained until the play. The actors, now all in costume, were gathered in the large green room, awaiting the beginning of the show.

Eliane Hyatt, the daughter of Duke Rehnberg and the actress who would be playing Queen Amelia, sat in front of a dresser in the room’s corner and gazed at herself in the mirror.

In its glass, she saw a pretty young girl with bluish-gray eyes and soft light-brown hair. She was wearing a dress for the play, though it had no pannier to expand and raise the skirt; it hung straight around her, like a robe, with flowers blossoming out from the hem.

It was a beautiful dress, but Eliane knew it would look better on a taller, more mature woman.



SERENDIA ACADEMY FIRST-YEAR

Eliane Hyatt

Someone like Bridget Greyham, with her gorgeous features and thick blond hair, or perhaps Claudia Ashley, with her black locks and mystical beauty.

Along with Bridget and Claudia, Eliane was considered one of the three most beautiful girls at the academy. Compared to them, however, Eliane looked like a child. She'd always been secretly worried she didn't measure up.

Eliane was a first-year in the advanced course, Claudia a second-year, and Bridget a third-year. As the youngest, she supposed her childish looks were only natural.

But both Bridget and Claudia had possessed an unparalleled charisma even during their time in the intermediate course.

As the daughter of an ambassador, Bridget was skilled in foreign languages. She was popular in high society and an exceptional pick for student council secretary.

Claudia was a full-blood descendant of the Lineage of the Wise and had a superb mind to prove it; she'd even represented the school in the chess competition the year before.

While Eliane had learned a fair bit about music and magecraft as part of her education, none of her talents was as striking as theirs.

The reason she, with only her cute looks to speak of, could be a part of their number was her distant relation to royalty—she was a second cousin to the second prince.

But I know how everyone feels deep down, she thought. Bridget or Claudia would have been much more suited for the role of Queen Amelia.

That day's play told the story of the hero Ralph, the founder and first king of Ridill. Eliane was playing the part of Queen Amelia, the one who supported him.

The queen was said to be a strong, wise, and above all proud woman. The girl in the mirror, however, was a far cry from that image, no matter how much makeup she caked on or how mature her dress. She didn't need anyone else to tell her—it was painfully obvious.

Perhaps because of her mood, her tiara and necklace felt awfully heavy. As

she looked at them, both the gorgeous golden tiara and the beautiful necklace with its decorative black frame seemed less and less like they belonged on her. She felt herself grow irritated.

Oh, how annoying. I hate this. If only the prince had agreed to play Ralph...

When the time came to choose Ralph's actor, the first person on everyone's mind had been the second prince, Felix Arc Ridill. Eliane had wanted the prince to play the role as well.

But he'd claimed he was too busy with student council affairs and quickly dropped out of the running. Eliane had attempted to use her charms to convince him, but he'd refused to give in.

If I am to play the queen, who but him can be king? After all, am I not the most suited for him?

Her head hurt. It felt like it was being slowly compressed. Her vision narrowed and began to flash red. It was probably her irritation and nerves driving her crazy.

Oh, I hate this. I hate it. Why does nothing ever go my way?

In the corner of her vision, she saw the boy who would be playing Ralph. Why wasn't it Felix?

I hate it. I hate it. Oh, I hate it so much...

As she unconsciously balled her fists in her lap, she heard a voice from the green room's entrance.

"Ohhh-ho-ho-ho! Good day to you all!"

It was a much higher, prouder laugh than even the actors could have managed, prompting Eliane to turn around in spite of herself. The others did the same, looking wide-eyed toward the source of the sound.

A figure with curled orange hair stood before the door—Isabelle Norton, the daughter of Count Kerbeck. Eliane recognized the girl as one of her classmates.

Accompanying Isabelle was a short girl with light-brown hair, fidgeting restlessly. *Oh, she's on the student council... Yes, the accountant. Monica Norton.* Eliane had heard of her, too. She was the lackluster country girl from

House Norton who had been appointed student council accountant due to her immense talent with numbers.

Eliane didn't want much to do with either of them. Isabelle's father, Count Kerbeck, was an influential noble with a lot of military power, even among the eastern Ridillian lords. He'd helped many other nobles with dragonraids, and Eliane's father, Duke Rehnberg, was no exception. Their territories didn't neighbor each other, but they were relatively close.

In the end, Isabelle was, to Eliane, both someone who stood out more than she did and someone she had to take care not to offend—a real thorn in her side.

As for Monica, she'd been made a student council member despite her common birth, and she saw Felix every day. What more reason did Eliane need to dislike the girl?

But Eliane tucked all that away as she stood and turned to face Isabelle. "Good day, Lady Isabelle," she said, maintaining a classy smile. "I don't believe you're part of this play. Did you need something from someone?"

"I heard you were all busy behind the scenes, so I've come to see if there was anything I could help with," said Isabelle, sounding for all the world like she wished to be of service. "Should you need assistance, please don't hesitate to ask. After all, my family's servant currently has nothing to do." Hostility crept into her voice as she said the last sentence and glanced at Monica.

Isabelle probably didn't like that the family outcast was enjoying the school festival without a care. She must be planning to assign her odd jobs and then laugh at her.

My, my. What a distasteful hobby, thought Eliane.

She *could* give Monica some errands like Isabelle wanted, but it would damage her reputation. The better choice would be to gently turn down Isabelle's offer and show empathy toward Monica. Then everyone around her would believe she was a kindhearted young lady.

"Lady Isabelle," she began, "I know you've gone out of your way to offer, but we have enough people helping backstage already..."

Just then, in the middle of her sentence, a strong gust of wind blew in from the window they had open for ventilation. Eliane's soft hair swayed and caught on a decoration on her necklace. She quickly tugged at it, but the small chain snapped. The necklace fell to the floor with a clack, red gemstone and all.

Both the breeze that had blown in from the window and the sharp gust that had severed the chain had been the work of the girl behind Isabelle. She had used uncharmed magecraft, but Eliane had no way of knowing that.

"Eek!" she yelped. "Oh no! The necklace..."

Before Eliane could gather it, Isabelle quickly scooped it up. "Oh, how awful!" she exclaimed. "Your necklace is broken! And there's no time left before the play!"

Eliane couldn't tell exactly *how* the chain was damaged because Isabelle's hand was hiding it.

But Isabelle looked down at the necklace and said, with a serious expression, "This is going to take some time to fix."

"That can't be! Queen Amelia can't appear without a necklace!" cried Eliane, panicking.

Isabelle offered her a gentle smile meant to calm her down, then removed the necklace from her own neck and handed it to her. "In that case, use *mine*. It's goldwork, made in the famous workshops of Anmel. I can guarantee its quality." The necklace she held out was beautiful, a ruby inlaid in a gold frame with small diamond drops all around it. "I believe this one will be much more fitting for you, Lady Eliane," she said, gently fastening its chain around the girl's neck.

The gold chain was tinged with pink to soften its color, which went very well with Eliane's complexion. *This isn't too bad...*, she thought.

As Eliane vacillated, Isabelle looked down at the broken necklace in her hands and said, "And, if I may say so, this one looks rather...childish, don't you think?"

Looking childish—that was one of Eliane's complexes. Isabelle had appealed perfectly to her weakness, and she responded immediately. "Y-yes. Indeed. You may be right... You won't mind if I borrow this necklace for the play?"

“Not at all. I’m honored to have been of help!”

Isabelle smiled sweetly. Then, as if a thought had just struck her, she looked at Monica and curled the corners of her lips into a sadistic grin. “Be happy, *servant*. I have a task for you.”

“Huh?! Um, um...”

As Monica fidgeted at this sudden attention, Isabelle passed her the broken piece of jewelry. “Fix this necklace. And you may not attend either the festival or the ball until it’s finished... Understood?”

As Isabelle pushed the broken necklace into Monica’s hands, she gave the girl a wink only she could see.

Monica’s lips trembled in admiration. *Lady Isabelle is amazing...!* she thought. She’d been so worried about how to recover the necklace, but Isabelle’s villainess act had delivered it right into her hands.

Floored by the girl’s quick wit, Monica hung her head, trying not to let others see the look on her face. Meekly, she accepted the necklace.

“I, um, I’ll go fix it...right now!”

Silently thanking Isabelle in her heart, Monica headed back out of the green room. *Now I just have to give this to the Abyss Shaman, bring the duplicate necklace back to the costume team, and the problem will be solved!*

Recovering the shamanic tool had gone so smoothly that something rather important had slipped completely from her memory.

“Hey. You there, miss. Do you have a moment?”

...She’d stopped watching out for a certain person she couldn’t afford to run into—her former teacher Gideon Rutherford.

* * *

Louis had gone to search for his master right after parting ways with Monica in the rear garden. Rutherford would stand out in his mage’s robe and should be easy to find.

Or so Louis had thought. Unfortunately, the Serendia Academy campus was huge, and it was proving difficult to spot him.

He would have liked to have Ryn's help with the search, but Monica couldn't protect the prince while recovering the shamanic tool, so the maid had to focus on guarding him instead.

Louis walked quickly, ruminating on his master's usual behavior. *Knowing him, he'll take a look at all the exhibits related to magecraft, then find a place without too many people around and smoke to his heart's content. Then he'll go to the faculty room to meet his old friend Mr. Macragan.*

And so Louis headed for the largest exhibit room—but unfortunately, Rutherford was nowhere in sight. Then he remembered the card he'd received at reception and took it out of his pocket. On it, there was a map to the magic history research club's exhibit. Apparently, they had a lot of data, so they were exhibiting in a separate room.

On a hunch, Louis followed the directions on the card and made his way to the clubroom. When he arrived, an older, white-haired man was just leaving. It was him—the Mage of Violet Smoke himself.

"I must say, that was some truly fascinating research," he said. "I'll suggest a joint publication between Minerva's and Serendia at the next faculty meeting."

"Ha-ha. I'm honored to hear that, sir."

After a chubby boy saw him off with a breathy laugh, Rutherford started down the hallway.

Louis was just a bit too far to call out and stop him, so instead, he quickly walked over. That was when he saw Monica standing right in front of his master. Louis grimaced.

Monica seemed to be heading outside; maybe she'd recovered the cursed tool. She probably hadn't noticed Rutherford approaching.

Right then, an idea formed in Louis's mind: deliver a flying kick to his master's head and confuse the situation. *A brilliant plan*, he thought, mentally patting himself on the back.

He wanted to execute it immediately, but as a Sage, he couldn't afford to cause any violent incidents at the academy. So instead, praying his master wouldn't notice Monica, Louis ran.

“Hey. You there, miss. Do you have a moment?”

Clutching the curse-imbued necklace to her chest, Monica froze at the voice behind her. She knew that voice. She’d heard it many times back at Minerva’s.

It’s... It’s Mr. Rutherford!

She must have run into him before Louis could find him and stop him. This was bad. *Really* bad.

Monica touched her left ear out of reflex. Unfortunately, Isabelle was still in the green room. She wouldn’t be able to act right away.

Do... Do I run away? But if he sees me running, he’ll know for sure it’s me...! She was so bad at anything to do with exercise that her plodding excuse for “running” would easily give her away. She could hear him now: “Even from afar, I could tell it was you immediately.”

“Where might the faculty room—?”

But before Rutherford could finish his question, a hand reached out from the side and grabbed Monica’s; the small palm belonged to a boy.

“You’re late!” a high-pitched voice scolded her. “How dare you make me wait. What nerve!”

Monica’s eyes widened as she looked at the person who had grabbed her. The boy had black hair and wore expensive clothing, like the son of a noble family. He was probably eleven or twelve. And now he was glaring at her, his eyes wide with anger.

...Huh? Huh?! Who’s this?! Monica searched her memory, but the boy was nowhere to be found. She didn’t have any acquaintances his age anyway, so if she did know him, she’d remember.

As Monica panicked, the boy pulled on her hand. He was walking quickly, heading outside. “Didn’t you promise to show me around the intermediate building?! Quickly, now! Mother is waiting!”

“Huh? Um, r-right...,” she stammered, hastening away from the scene.

From behind her, she heard Louis’s voice calling out to Rutherford. “Master! It’s been ages!” Apparently, he’d found the man in the nick of time.

I think, um, I'm saved... But... She had no time to sigh in relief as she looked toward the boy pulling her along.

But who is he?!

* * *

The black-haired mystery boy pulled her out of the advanced building and into an empty garden near the intermediate building. Then he took a careful look around, finally spotting someone else. His face lit up.

“Mother!”

He ran over to a woman holding a parasol. She looked a bit under forty. Her orange hair was done up in a classy style, and she wore a deep red dress that complemented her slender frame.

“U-um, I, um...,” stammered Monica nervously.

The woman smiled. It was a pretty expression, elegant but playful—and Monica immediately recognized it.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Silent Witch—Lady Monica Everett. I am Sylvia Norton, wife of Azure Norton, the Count of Kerbeck.”

“And I’m her son, Henry Norton. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Silent Witch!” The boy who had dragged her here lost his impudent expression and greeted her with a youthful but noble carriage.

Monica’s mouth opened and closed a few times. “Then, um, that means you’re Lady Isabelle’s...”

“Mother, yes.”

“And little brother!”

Monica then realized why Isabelle had placed her family at the intermediate building. It was because of her brother, Henry. If they said he was looking into possibly enrolling, then the Norton family wouldn’t seem out of place.

Henry, for his part, practically had visible sparkles in his eyes. His expression was quite similar to his older sister’s. “Um! Excuse me, Lady Silent Witch... Please, may I call you my elder sister?!”

This, too, was almost the exact same thing Isabelle had said to her when they first met.

Monica nodded, her face tense. Henry's cheeks flushed crimson, and he smiled from the bottom of his heart. "I've always wanted to meet you, my sister! I always get so jealous whenever Isabelle sends me letters about how things are going! I wanted to help you during today's school festival, so I practiced a whole bunch for my role as a villainous noble brat!"

But why? Was that really necessary? wondered Monica. In fact, she was extremely doubtful there was any need for Isabelle to act like a villainess in the first place. She figured Louis had told her something like, *At a school for nobles, I can only imagine the Silent Witch playing the role of bullied child. Ha-ha-ha.* Monica's eyes grew distant as she imagined her colleague's evil laughter.

Meanwhile, Henry looked up at her, gaze filled with anticipation. "Did I do a good job playing the villain, my sister?"

His performance had come off more as a normal boy going through a rebellious phase than an actual villain. But she found it hard to be so honest—especially with his eyes sparkling like that.

Monica chose her words carefully. "Um, well, you really saved me. Thank you very much..."

"I'm honored to have been of help!"

From behind the happy-looking Henry, his mother, Sylvia, chided him. "Now, Henry. We mustn't bother the Silent Witch and keep her from her mission any further."

"Yes, Mother."

Henry backed down. Sylvia turned to Monica and said, "Please don't hesitate to call upon us whenever you need, Silent Witch. Should anyone attempt to obstruct your path, they shall find themselves twisted around the little finger of this villainous madame."

She tilted her parasol slightly, casting a shadow over her face and lending a good deal of ghastliness to her smile. Just as Isabelle carefully calculated the motions of her fan, this self-professed "villainous madame" had perfect control

over her prop. She was a true actress.

Monica awkwardly thanked them and left, wondering why in the world this family had such a weird obsession with villains.

* * *

Once the frighteningly reliable mother-son villain pair had bid Monica farewell, she left the garden and headed off campus.

She spotted Ray immediately. The Abyss Shaman had moved almost imperceptibly closer to the school since their meeting that morning; he was now muttering to some mushrooms growing at the base of a tree.

“Ah, mushrooms. How wonderful. So full of life... I envy that life... I envy it so much...”

So he’s even envious of mushrooms, thought Monica, coming up behind him.

“Excuse me, um, Abyss Shaman?” she said hesitantly.

Ray gave a start and turned to look at her, his pale fingers still covering his face. And then he began to rattle off excuses, sounding like he was about to cry. “Please wait! You’re wrong. I promise, you’re wrong. I know it’s not right to leave everything to you, so I’ve been doing my best to think of ways to get into the academy...” His throat clenched as he formed an uncanny smile; his pink eyes glowed from behind his pale fingers. “And I came up with something... I could simply curse Serendia Academy and have mushrooms grow all over it. If it was covered in mushrooms, even I’d be able to walk in normally... Anyway, I’m about to curse the school, so please just wait a moment...”

Cursing the school to save it from a cursed item seemed a little backward to Monica, and as he began to chant, she hastily stopped him. “Um! Um, I, uh, I got the item back!” she declared, taking the Crimson Wrath out from her pocket and handing it to him.

Overcome with emotion, he opened his pink eyes wide, and his pale lips trembled. “Th-thank you. Thank you so much... I’m saved...!”

Ray plucked the necklace from her hands with slender fingers, then quickly chanted something resembling a magecraft incantation. Anyone who had studied magecraft, however, would know that wasn’t what it was. Shamanic

spells were an entirely separate entity.

When he finished his chant, the purple seal on his finger seemed to grow out from his body like a tree root, extending and twisting into the air. Monica drew in a breath as she watched it engulf the Crimson Wrath's red gemstone.

A moment later, the branch-like seal ballooned to several times its size. It was like watching a snake swallow a large frog whole. Ray's shamanic seal had *eaten* the curse placed on the item.

"Curse retrieval complete..."

Ray's fingers came away from the item, and the gemstone, once bloodred, had become a dull reddish brown.

Monica wasn't familiar with curses and shamanic techniques, but she guessed Ray had used his seal to absorb the curse embedded within the stone into his own body.

Ray, who had more than two hundred curses already residing inside him, acted as if nothing had happened, even after absorbing the Crimson Wrath. As usual, he seemed about to keel over as he happily complained, "Oh, thank goodness. I can go home... I'm so tired..."

"Um, are you leaving now, then?" asked Monica.

"Yes. I have the item, and if I stay in such a radiant place any longer, I am liable to melt away... Cause of death: too much radiance... Yes, a fitting death for a shaman, indeed... It would be spoken of for generations..."

This seemed like an especially novel way to die, and Monica wasn't sure how to respond. But eventually, she rallied herself and exclaimed, "Um, Abyss Shaman!" causing his shoulders to jolt.

She leaned forward a little and continued. "The festival is really amazing, you know. The magic history research club has a splendid presentation... Oh, and it mentions your family, the Albrights, too! And there's a big outdoor play. My friend is involved with the costumes... Um, and there's a lot of really tasty food, so... Um..."

Monica was winded after this lengthy explanation, but she clenched her fists

and squeezed out the rest. “So I’d love it if you could, um...maybe enjoy the festival, too. Even just a little...”

Ray had insisted he didn’t fit in at Serendia Academy. But to be honest, Monica had thought the same about herself when she first arrived—that it was wrong for her to be here, that she just wanted to go home.

And yet after spending time at the school and helping prepare for the festival, she now had a real desire for everyone to enjoy the event.

“I, um, I-I’m sorry for saying something weird...,” she stammered. “I-I’ll be going now, gooph-bye!”

She bowed quickly to Ray and turned around. She had to get back to school to guard Felix—and to make this festival a success as a Serendia Academy student.

Ray watched as Monica awkwardly trotted away, a dazed look on his face. Once she was out of sight, he turned his back to the school and started walking. After a few steps, he stopped and glanced behind him.

Then, several steps later, he stopped again—and again.

Once he’d repeated this about ten times, he pulled his robe’s hood deep over his eyes and began to cross the sunlit stretch toward Serendia Academy.

* * *

“I must say, it *has* been a while, Master Rutherford! What a coincidence, running into you here like this!” Louis squeezed every ounce of feigned politeness he could muster into his voice and expression.

Rutherford furrowed his wild brows and looked at the other man with suspicion. “What are you plotting?”

“Oh, what a harsh question to ask a pupil you haven’t seen in so long.”

Rutherford took out his pipe and snorted. The old man was a master at intimidation. “Aren’t you part of the first prince’s faction? The second prince is on Serendia’s student council... Surely you’re not plotting some kind of assassination, right?”

Resisting the urge to reply, *Unfortunately, I’m here to protect him*, Louis smiled and said, “Actually, my pupil attends this school. I’m here to inspect his

progress.”

“Your pupil... You mean that brat who blew up my lab when he lost control of his mana?”

“The very one! He’s a full-fledged apprentice now.”

Even as Louis spoke, Rutherford seemed to be looking off into the distance—in the direction the Norton boy had pulled Monica.

“What’s the matter, Master?” he asked. “Is something bothering you?”

“No, it’s just that I saw a girl who looked a lot like Everett a few moments ago.”

As Louis had thought, the man was on the cusp of sniffing out the Silent Witch. *You’re too damn sharp for your own good, you old geezer*, he thought to himself before further brightening his voice. “You must be imagining things. The Silent Witch is a dyed-in-the-wool shut-in, after all.”

“So she’s still shutting herself away, even as a Sage...” Rutherford scratched at his short white hair, then turned to glare at Louis. “She’s your colleague, yes? Be a little more considerate toward her.”

Louis’s smile slipped at his master’s criticism. What did this old man want from him anyway? “I’m not her guardian, nor am I her friend. Her personality is none of my business, so long as she does her job properly.”

The Silent Witch was both shy and inhuman. She was a creepy little girl who saw people as nothing more than a bunch of numbers.

But what did that matter? She was a true genius. Even Louis could see her talent. Wasn’t that enough?

Louis might nitpick, telling her to act or dress more like a human or to spend some time learning how to hold a conversation, but deep down, he didn’t really expect anything from her. He simply wasn’t that interested.

“That’s all a colleague is, don’t you think?”

Louis smiled dispassionately, and Rutherford jutted out his bottom lip in a scowl, wrinkling his nose. He looked truly disgusted.



CHAPTER 5

StandIn for a Hero

A lone girl was making her way through the woods on the Serendia Academy campus. She was in her late teens and wore the school's uniform. Her hair was black, and her eyebrows were just a little bit thicker than those of other girls her age.

With winter so near at hand, every step brought the crunch of dead leaves. This girl's footfalls, however, were silent.

They weren't the quiet steps of the noble young ladies attending the academy, however. These were the steps of a wild animal.

Eventually, she stopped in front of a large oak tree, looked up, and spoke.

"Ewan, I've finished preliminary recon inside the school."

"Thank you, Heidi."

The voice that met her from the tree above was high-pitched for a man's but low for a woman's. It was sweet but a little rough, like honey boiled down and scorched. Its owner, Ewan, could use any voice he wished—old, young, male, or female. And it wasn't just his pitch—he could accurately replicate subtle accents and verbal tics. But whenever he spoke around Heidi, this eccentric voice was the one he chose.

This manner of speaking would make most people frown in distaste, but Heidi loved it and him.

So to fulfill the expectations of the one she loved, she faithfully reported everything she'd seen. "I spotted someone who might cause some trouble: Louis Miller, the Barrier Mage and one of the Seven Sages."

"Oh my! That won't do. Why, he's the Sages' number one combat expert! How terrifying."

While the Barrier Mage's presence at the festival might be a coincidence, it was best to assume Ewan's infiltration during the chess tournament had put

him on guard. Either way, there was clearly more security here than at the competition.

“Should we postpone our plans?” Heidi asked.

“No, we simply *have* to move forward. My face is all ready, so... Let’s get this little show started—secretly, quickly, and without anyone noticing.”

* * *

After leaving the shamanic tool with Ray, Monica headed straight back to the green room, told them she’d fixed the chain, and handed the duplicate necklace to the costume team. Only minimal support staff remained; the actors were nowhere to be seen. They’d probably all moved backstage by now.

“Silent Witch.”

Monica heard a voice in her ears, despite being alone. Ryn was striking her eardrums directly.

“The prince has arrived at his seat for the play along with a few guests, and Lord Louis has directed Gideon Rutherford to the faculty room. I believe there is little chance you will run into him for the time being.”

Felix would probably be sitting in a reserved seat in the front row. The safest move for Monica would be to sit behind him and keep an eye on what he was doing. Ryn and Nero would be waiting in the wings as well, so if anything happened, they could all act immediately.

In an exceptionally hushed voice, Monica whispered, “Okay,” and headed for the stage outside.

The outdoor play was the biggest highlight of Serendia Academy’s school festival. While there was still some time left before the opening act, most of the audience seating was already filled.

Felix was stationed up front, as were Bridget and Elliott. The latter two seemed to have brought family; a man sat next to each of them, probably their respective fathers.

As for Lord Cyril and Lord Maywood... I wonder if they’ll be skipping the play, she thought, looking around. Eventually, she spotted Cyril through the crowd. He was seated at the opposite end, by himself. Unlike Elliott and Bridget,

however, he didn't appear to be with any family.

She wondered whether to call out to him, but then someone tapped Monica on the shoulder. "Found you, Monica!"

"Lana!"

"Over here," said her friend, taking her hand and leading her to a seat. Apparently, she'd saved one for her.

They were a bit left of the middle, and she could keep an eye on Felix, which made it a perfect spot for Monica.

As she sat down to Lana's left, the muscular gentleman to Lana's right turned to her. "Oh?" he said, his eyes widening. "You must be Lady Monica, yes? It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Lana's father."

Baron Collette fiddled with his mustache, smiling politely at Monica. He didn't look much like his daughter, but his hair was the same flaxen color.

While his clothing was showy, with a patterned shirt and goldwork accessories, it didn't come across as vulgar or crude. He must have a talent for coordinating outfits. He was stylish—just like his daughter.

Monica tensed up. She tried her best to give a polite self-introduction, lest she offend. "P-leased to meet you, sir. Lana has been very kind to me, so, well..."

"No, I should be thanking you for how well you've treated my daughter. Hmm..." The man rubbed his plump chin, then squinted at Monica. The expression was identical to Lana's whenever she was inspecting Monica's clothes or hair.

"I see. You're just as she described in her letters... Yes, that dress from when Lana was twelve would indeed suit you best for this type of ball. Oh, and I've had the altered garment brought to your room, Lana. Take a look at it when you have a chance."

It seemed Lana had requested the alterations through her father.

Baron Collette continued to twirl his mustache as his voice took on a more prideful tone. "The cut of the sleeves would have looked rather childish on a girl

her age, yes? I instructed the seamstress to remove them, making the top half simple and refreshing. To compensate, I had more frills added near the waist and increased the volume of the lower half. The lace we imported recently seemed a good fit, so I had it worked into the skirt.”

“I see, I see!” said Lana excitedly. “Dresses with more volume near the waist have been in fashion recently, haven’t they?!”

“Heh-heh-heh. Not to toot my own horn, but I think we did a good job. You can look forward to it. I also had a ribbon crafted using the leftover fabric. I think it would look wonderful braided into her hair, don’t you?”

“Yes! That would be marvelous! Let’s do that!”

Monica didn’t understand most of the conversation between Lana and her father, but apparently Baron Collette had taken one of his daughter’s old dresses and made some changes to it.

The man’s eyes were kind as he watched Lana. Monica could tell just from sitting next to them how much love he had for his daughter.

Daddy...

Monica’s father had been similar to Lana’s. He hadn’t been social, and he knew nothing about trends, but he’d looked at her the same way Baron Collette looked at Lana.

Feeling nostalgic and a little sad, she quietly watched over their discussion until a bell rang to announce the start of the play.

The wooden stage was quite elaborate. Despite being designed for use outdoors, it had two curtains, one in front of the stage and one behind, both capable of closing and opening individually. The front curtain separated the stage from the audience, while the rear one was used for backgrounds.

The red curtain at the front was smoothly pulled to either side, revealing the stage. The play’s first scene took place at a fortress. On top of some scaffolding, made to look like the fortress’s summit, a petite girl with wheat-colored hair was praying.

“O great Luluchera, King of the Water Spirits. Please deliver this message to

my tribe.”

The one praying was Eliane Hyatt in the role of Queen Amelia—the same young lady from whom Monica had taken the Crimson Wrath. Naturally, she wasn’t wearing it now; instead, she wore the necklace Isabelle had lent her.

Everyone in the kingdom had heard at least once the story of how the hero Ralph had founded the nation.

Long ago, before these lands were unified into a single country, seven tribes had been in a state of constant conflict with one another. Ralph, a young man from the Earth Tribe, received a command from Archraedo, King of the Earth Spirits, to unify the seven disparate groups. Then, after a long journey, he eventually accomplished just that. In the end, he traveled to the land of the dragons. There, he felled a black dragon and founded the Kingdom of Ridill.

It was a long story, so the play was split into two parts—one portrayed his adventure to unify the seven tribes and the other his final battle against the dragon.

The one playing the main character, Ralph, was a tall, blond-haired boy. People had begged Felix to play the part, but he had apparently declined, citing his busy schedule.

The boy was rather good at maneuvering around the stage, but he wasn’t stellar when it came to reciting his lines. His delivery was less than fluent, and he failed to properly project, falling somewhat short of the “brave and valiant hero king” the role called for.

The same could be said of Eliane’s performance as Amelia. The queen was a strong, proud, beautiful woman. Eliane, however, was ephemeral and weak—the type of pampered aristocratic girl one wanted to protect. She wasn’t a bad actress, but she was a far cry from the kind of woman she was attempting to portray.

The brilliantly condensed script, intricate stage fixtures, gorgeous costumes, and flashy fireworks used in the effects—all first-rate—only made the actors’ lack of charm more vivid.

Eventually, the curtains closed on the play’s first half, and the audience gave

their applause. Everyone clapped, but the response lacked emotion. They clapped because it was the same old tale everyone knew and because it was put on by the sons and daughters of important nobles.

“I knew it. The prince would have made a better Ralph.”

“They should have gone with Lady Bridget for Queen Amelia.”

“Oh, how I wish I could have seen the prince play Ralph!”

Those were the sorts of comments Monica heard from the seats around her.

I guess the prince and Lady Bridget really do suit each other..., she thought. With their gorgeous features, they’d look like a work of art just sitting next to each other. And with Felix’s bold, outgoing personality and Bridget’s air of gallantry, they fit the images of Ralph and Amelia perfectly.

Had they been onstage, the applause would have sounded very different.

“Monica,” said Lana, “there’s some time before the second half. Would you like to get a little snack?”

“Huh? Oh, okay.”

Monica got up, craning her neck to look for Felix. She had lost sight of the prince in the crowd. She was wondering if it would be best to follow him when she heard Ryn’s voice.

“I will keep watch over the prince. Please nourish yourself, Silent Witch.”

With all the activity and running around that day, Monica had gotten unusually hungry. She decided to take Ryn up on her offer and left to get a snack with Lana.

* * *

“Lady Eliane, that was a wonderful performance,” the servants said to her as she went backstage.

“Oh,” she replied absentmindedly, thrusting the veil she’d been wearing at one of them.

Oh, I hate this, I hate this...

She’d had a good view of the audience from up on stage. Naturally, she’d

been able to see the object of her infatuation: Felix Arc Ridill.

During her performance, her eyes had remained on him. She'd ignored stage directions during the scene where she professed her love for Ralph and practically turned to face Felix instead.

The prince had been watching her from his seat, but his eyes made it clear he was only looking at an actress onstage. He'd looked at Ralph and all the minor characters in the same way; he hadn't been looking at her *alone*.

But that doesn't make any sense, she thought. Isn't he meant to become my husband one day?

She felt a pressure against her temples, one step away from a full-fledged headache. Red started to creep into the corners of her vision, setting her on edge.

Unbeknownst to her, a bloody red had begun to seep into her blue-gray eyes. That red—the fragments of the curse—surfaced for only a moment before sinking back down out of sight.

This won't do. Prince Felix must look only at me... He must love only me—and more. Love me more...

She had pestered the one in charge over and over to put Felix onstage with her, but her hopes had been dashed. His answer had been blunt: He was simply too busy with student council work.

He must love me more. That's what my great-uncle said. He needs to love me even more. Much, much more. He must.

A crimson fury roiled in her blue-gray eyes once again. The powerful anger seemed to crush her mind, easily knocking down the walls of reason within her.

Propelled by her growing rage, Eliane went alone to the wing of the stage. They had a faux balcony set up there for the play. She could climb up onto it if she wanted, using a ladder that wasn't visible from the seats.

Eliane put her hands on the ladder, then chanted a quick spell. It wasn't anything special—just a little wind spell to create a few tiny fissures in the planks. Afterward, she let go of the ladder, removed the tiara from her wheat-

colored hair, and tossed it up onto the balcony.

Then, when the boy playing Ralph passed by, she gave an exaggerated scream.

“Eeeek!”

Hearing her, he ran over immediately and asked what was the matter.

With tears in her eyes, Eliane pointed up at the balcony. “A bird... A bird dropped my tiara on the balcony.”

“Oh? I’m sure it was just playing a little trick on you because it wanted your attention, Lady Eliane,” said the boy with a jovial laugh before smoothly climbing up the ladder. He was probably trying to impress her.

But just before he reached the top, one of the rungs split under his foot.

“Ahhhhhhh!” the boy cried out, reaching into the air for some kind of support. Unfortunately, there was nobody around to grab his hand, and he ended up slamming into the floor upside down.

Eliane brought her hands to her cheeks and let loose a piercing scream.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeek! Someone, anyone! Help!”

* * *

Lana and Monica returned to the advanced building to get a snack. Lana’s father, Baron Collette, had some business talks to settle with certain nobles attending the festival. With the summer social season over and fewer parties being held, Serendia Academy’s school festival was an important arena for such interaction, at least for those invited.

During the festival, the cafeteria was open to everyone—and naturally, it was packed. To ameliorate this, the school had provided several classrooms as dining spaces for light fare and tea parties.

“You know, I heard Glenn is helping out in the refreshment area.”

Monica’s eyes went round. The ever-energetic Glenn Dudley was the son of a butcher and would gladly hold a barbecue behind the school if given the chance. Apparently, he had made friends with the kitchen staff, and now he was helping them. Since they were going for snacks, Lana suggested they check

up on him. Monica agreed without argument.

The halls were packed now that the play's first half had just ended, but Lana smoothly wove her way through the crowd. As long as she kept up, even Monica had little trouble following.

"You're really good at walking in crowded places, Lana...", she said.

Lana giggled. "Our local bazaars are even crazier than this, you know. One mistake and you're stuck for good... Oh?"

She stopped, her eyes on something in front of them. Monica followed her gaze.

They could see Felix surrounded by several students. Monica recognized the others, too—the one in charge of the play and a few of her colleagues responsible for various aspects of the performance.

Lana, who supervised costumes, tilted her head to the side in confusion. "I wonder if something happened."

Just then, a bespectacled girl near Felix spotted Lana and waved at her. "Lady Lana Colette! Perfect timing! As the costume director, would you mind helping us convince the prince?"

"Lady Maybell? Did something happen?" asked Lana dubiously.

The girl in the glasses—Maybell—began to speak quickly, her face flushing from the effort. "The student playing Ralph fell from a stage set and injured himself. He broke his arm and won't be able to continue. We need a replacement!"

Monica and Lana both looked at her in shock. Ralph was the play's main character. It wouldn't be easy to replace him.

Then all these people are swarming around the prince because...

Quickly understanding the situation, Monica shot a glance at Felix. He returned a troubled look, lowering his brows. "Yeah, they're begging me to take his place," he said. "I'm not quite sure what to do." Apparently, he wasn't very into the idea.

And yet Maybell, gesticulating madly, continued her desperate attempts at

persuasion. “But, sir! Oh heavens. At this point, if you don’t agree, we shall have to call off the play! The god of the arts is always posing me trials to overcome! And only in triumph shall I earn the praise and applause of the audience!”

Felix gave the practically intoxicated Maybell an uncomfortable smile. He was probably just as reluctant to call off the play as anyone else—it was the highlight of the festival.

With endless calm, he asked Maybell, “Is there no one else you can go to?”

“Not just anyone can play a main character like Ralph! First, he must be tall enough to fit in the costume! Second, while the latter half doesn’t have many lines, the main scene is him slaying the dragon. Therefore, he must also be physically capable! Third, and most importantly! Sounds don’t carry as well outdoors. So he must have a strong voice!”

Considering all of her conditions, Felix did seem the most suitable for the task. He was tall and attractive with long, slender legs and a body that adhered to the golden ratio. He was also physically talented, always earning praise from his swordplay and riding instructors. Plus, he spoke in front of others on a daily basis and was skilled at making himself heard by a crowd. He never raised his voice, and yet it was mysteriously clear and ringing.

Above all, if the nation’s second prince was to play the main character—the kingdom’s founder—that alone would rouse the audience to much higher levels of excitement.

Monica leaned toward Lana and whispered, “Uh, the costumes... Can you not, um...adjust them?”

“I doubt it,” she replied. “They were designed with a tall man in mind. If I simply took in the hems, it would look unnatural.”

In that case, their options were limited. Maybell and the others were desperate to keep Felix in their sights—like snakes cornering their prey.

As Monica grew more and more flustered by the tense atmosphere, the door to a nearby classroom opened with a clatter.

“Meaaat! Meaaat! Anyone up for some tasty meaaat?! Fresh off the grill! Cooked in sauuuuce!”

The loud, working-class accent and the delicious scent of meat washed over the academy's lofty splendor, overriding it.

The voice's owner turned to look around, and when his eyes fell on Monica and Lana, he waved. "Monica! Lana! I didn't know you were here! We just finished cooking the meat. Try some! My father collaborated with the school chef on a secret sauce—it's really incredible! You definitely don't want to miss out!"

With his uniform sleeves rolled up, an apron hanging from his neck, and a bandanna wrapped around his forehead, Glenn looked about as far from an academy student as you could get.

As the play staff stared blankly at this sudden intruder, Glenn spotted Felix and spoke even louder. "Oh! President! Thank you so much for choosing my family to provide the meat today! My mom and dad are both so pleased... I've made them proud enough for a lifetime!"

Felix's eyes narrowed for a moment as he looked Glenn up and down. He was almost certainly plotting something.

"I'm happy you're happy, Dudley," he said.

"Seriously, I don't know how to thank you, President!"

"Oh? Then perhaps you'd be willing to do me a favor."

"No problem!" said Glenn, nodding without a second thought.

Monica covertly put a hand to her head. She knew what was coming.

Felix wore a radiant, elegant smile as he turned back to face Maybell and the others. "The replacement must be tall, physically capable, and have a voice that carries, yes?"

"U-um, well, yes..."

"Then he's perfect, isn't he?" said Felix, patting Glenn on the shoulder.

He was right. Glenn was tall for his age and very fit. And, of course, he had a loud voice.

Not grasping the situation, Glenn looked at the prince in confusion. "Um,

what do you mean by ‘replacement’? Am I standing in for you? Wait, am I gonna be student council president for a day?! You mean, like, put on your cape and pretend to be you? I’m not sure I can say all that smart stuff, though.”

“No, no. It’s a much simpler task than that. I’d like you to slay a dragon and protect the future Queen Amelia.”

Glenn’s eyes began to sparkle like a dog offered a meaty bone. Monica could practically see a tail at his back, wagging to and fro.

“Slaying a dragon... Protecting a heroine... What the heck? That’s crazy! And awesome!”

“It is, isn’t it? Very awesome. After all, you’ll be performing the role of this kingdom’s hero. So please turn off that accent, all right?”

“Gotcha! ...Er, sorry. Got you, Prez!”

If he thought that counted as “turning off his accent,” things were looking pretty dire.

Felix seemed to approve, however. He pushed Glenn toward Maybell and the others. “As you can see, he’s raring to go.”

“I’ve got no clue what’s going on, but I’ll kick butt out there... Er, wait. I meant to say, I *shall* kick butt out there!”

Unease and concern were written all over the play staff’s faces—as well as Lana’s and Monica’s.

But Glenn seemed enthusiastic about the whole thing, saying things like, “What kind of dragon am I fighting?” Monica was concerned. Very concerned.

And so began the play’s chaotic second half.



CHAPTER 6

Bluish-Gray Fouled by Crimson

“This is Glenn Dudley, who will be serving as our replacement Ralph.”

Eliane couldn't believe her ears. Maybell had just introduced a new boy to the actors gathered backstage: an affable young man, his brown hair tinged with gold—who was most definitely *not* Felix.

Oh? Hmm? What's this? Outwardly, Eliane gently tilted her head in confusion, but all the while, her bluish-gray eyes darkened. *Why is Prince Felix not the replacement? I am the heroine, am I not? Why will Prince Felix not stand in for the hero? ...Ah, I know. This Glenn Dudley fellow must have selfishly demanded the role. The nerve! That simply must be what happened,* she told herself, calming her emotions.

Maybell, the acting director and the one who had brought Glenn backstage, pushed up the rim of her glasses and said, “Incidentally...Glenn was directly recommended by Prince Felix.”

Eliane desperately held back a very unladylike *what?!*

Prince Felix recommended him? The prince suggested this man play the role of my husband?

How could she tolerate such a thing? She could not. Felix was supposed to be her husband. Now he was pairing her up with someone else? She couldn't bear it. And the man in question lacked even a shred of class or grace!

“Heya, I'm Glenn Dudley! Never acted before, but I used to pretend to be the hero Ralph all the time as a kid, so I'm sure I'll do fine!”

Everyone present wondered how in the world he could draw such confidence from such limited experience, and Eliane was no exception. The others stared at the newcomer, distrust evident on their faces. She wanted to follow suit, but instead she offered a graceful, noble smile and introduced herself. “I am Eliane Hyatt, playing the role of Amelia. It's a pleasure to be working with you, Lord Glenn.”

“You’re playing Amelia?” he asked. He blinked and looked down at her, seeming a little surprised.

Eliane *was* the daughter of a duke. She was sure he must be nervous at the thought of sharing a stage with such a high-class lady.

...But then he said, “You seem kinda different from the cool Amelia I always imagined.”

The other actors immediately froze. Eliane kept the soft smile on her face, but flames of rage ignited in her bluish-gray eyes.

Eliane wasn’t a good fit to play Amelia, and everyone knew it. But she’d been chosen anyway, because she was Felix’s second cousin, which made Duke Clockford her great-uncle. Since the school was under his jurisdiction, she enjoyed a status similar to Felix’s. Taking this into account, the other students had chosen to make her the heroine. Eliane knew there had been a secret, unofficial vote for who should play the role, and she hadn’t even made the top three.

So, while Glenn hadn’t meant anything by his remark, it had hit Eliane’s biggest sore spot.

Naturally, she didn’t let her anger show. She maintained the facade of a high-class noblewoman. “It’s true,” she said. “I may be a far cry from the great Queen Amelia. But I will still do my best to play the part.”

Her smile was tranquil on the surface, but deep down, she sharpened the blade of her malice and let crimson wrath burn in her eyes.

Ah, what a fool he is. I must make him aware of his position... Of how arrogant he is to even think of standing at my side.

* * *

“Why don’t you come witness Dudley’s valiant performance from the reserved seats?” Felix said, bringing Monica all the way to the front row, where he’d been sitting for the first half.

“I-is someone going to be mad at me for sitting here?” she stammered.

“You’re part of the student council. There shouldn’t be any issues.”

Lana was running around backstage making minor adjustments to the costumes. Apparently, she wouldn't finish until the moment the play started, and it was unlikely she'd make it back to her seat.

So instead, Monica would watch Glenn's theatrical debut seated next to Felix. Both parts of this situation were bad for her health.

As she held a hand to her stomach, Felix looked at the white rose decoration at Monica's breast. "That flower... Let me guess. Did Cyril give that to you?"

"Huh? Oh yes." Monica nodded vigorously. "He said it was a lucky charm so that I wouldn't embarrass myself."

Felix blinked in surprise. "...I see. Is that what he said? I suppose that's very like him," he muttered to himself, still staring at the decoration.

She thought she saw his eyes narrow slightly—almost imperceptibly—in displeasure.

That, for some reason, unsettled her deeply.

Monica began to fidget, and Felix immediately reverted to his usual gentle smile. "This is your first school festival," he said. "Are you having fun?"

If she was telling the truth, there hadn't been any time to have fun. That was partly because of her mission to guard Felix, but she'd also been running around that morning trying to retrieve the shamanic tool.

She smiled vaguely and tried to dodge the issue. "Well, it's, um, only just started... Uhhh, are you having fun, sir?"

"Well, I'm the host, so I'm supposed to be making sure everyone else has fun."

Monica knew this festival was partly meant as a public debut for the second prince and to show off his grandfather Duke Clockford's power and authority to the kingdom's nobles.

But it seems like...

Felix's words sounded sad to Monica. She couldn't help recalling the night they'd spent in Corlapton. He'd called himself Ike during the Bell-Ringing Festival and gallivanted through the nighttime streets with her. He'd grinned

mischievously, twisted her around his little finger, spoken at length about the things he enjoyed... It seemed to her he'd had a lot of fun that night.

"Monica?"

Felix looked at her anxiously as she fell silent. His brows lowered slightly into a frown, and for a moment, she wondered whether she was looking at the prince or at Ike.

This was Serendia Academy. The one beside her was Felix Arc Ridill, the second prince. But it seemed so sad to write off the boy named Ike as a single night's illusion.

I can't be thinking about this right now. I have to focus on protecting him. Monica stifled the sadness bubbling up inside her and awkwardly spoke up. "Um, I wonder if Glenn is going to be okay..."

She had to admit her change of topic sounded forced, but she *was* worried about Glenn. She recalled their ballroom dance class, when he'd enthusiastically declared, "I'll just try and mimic everyone else," then proceeded to fling her around the room. The memory was still fresh in her mind, and, in all honesty, she couldn't imagine his acting going much better.

But Felix didn't look particularly worried. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying himself. "I'm sure he'll be fine," he said. "He has a lot of spirit. Just as I'd expect from a famous mage's disciple."

"...Huh?"

Monica knew Glenn was a mage's apprentice, but not that his master was famous. *Come to think of it, he said his master was the one who sent him here.*

But Felix had spoken without hesitation. *Who could his master be?* Monica idly called to mind the high mages she knew of, but none of them quite fit.

Besides, if a famous mage's pupil was going anywhere, wouldn't it be Minerva's...? Why would Glenn's master choose Serendia?

The bell rang, interrupting her thoughts and signaling the start of the show. The second half of the play was about to begin.

The student doing the narration explained the events thus far, ending with a

description of how the main character Ralph arrived at the black dragon's lair.

"Seems they've abbreviated the story a bit," murmured Felix.

"D-did they?"

"Usually, they act out the events leading up to his battle with the dragon. They must have omitted it all."

The curtains opened, and a papier-mâché dragon entered from the stage's left side. It was made of paper and cloth plastered onto a wooden framework, but it was of excellent quality. And above all, it was *big*. Several people were inside, moving it.

The black dragon's wild, piercing scream echoed through the venue. Then two people appeared from the right: the main character Ralph and the heroine Amelia.

Glenn, playing Ralph, smoothly unsheathed the sword at his waist and pointed it at the dragon, reciting his line. "It is I, bestowed with the divine protection of the seven Spirit Kings! You have brought ruin enough to this land, dragon! Taste my blade!"

Even those confused by the change in actors were pulled back into the story the moment they heard that voice. Glenn wasn't a particularly talented actor, but his voice carried well, and his sharp movements easily drew the audience's attention.

"Haaah!"

Glenn leaped into the air and brought his sword down on the dragon. Then, as he landed, he delivered a flashy horizontal slice.

Felix murmured, "His swings are a little exaggerated for real combat, but they're perfect for the stage."

Glenn's swordsmanship was the opposite of the elegant style favored by nobles—it was unpolished and boorish. But his long limbs moved freely, and the sight of him cutting into the dragon certainly brought the play to life.

With power borrowed from the Spirit Kings, the hero Ralph would steadily drive the black dragon back. Eventually, the cornered creature would use the

last of its strength to open its mouth and spit flame. The heroine Amelia would then block it with a defensive barrier, while Ralph delivered the finishing blow, right between the dragon's eyes. At the end, Amelia would run to Ralph, give him a celebratory kiss, and the curtains would fall. At least, that was the traditional sequence of events.

"Damn human!" roared the dragon. "My flames will burn you to cinders!" It spread its wings wide as a burst of sound ripped between Ralph and the dragon. The stagehands had used explosive powder to achieve this effect.

Ralph took a step back as Amelia, waiting behind him, raised her voice. "Lord Ralph, I will create a defensive barrier. Take that chance to pierce the dragon's brow!"

Then she chanted the spell to put up the barrier. It wasn't an actual chant, of course. It was just a performance. Or it was supposed to be.

Monica, though, felt something was wrong.

...Huh? she thought. That chant, it's... It's just acting, right?

Not many people could instantly grasp the purpose of a spell just from hearing its chant. Plus, the stage itself was a ways back from the audience. Nobody else would have noticed.

But the Silent Witch, extremely familiar with magecraft formulae, just happened to be sitting up front in the reserved seating, and she could make out the words and understand them.

Eliane was neither reciting a script nor casting a barrier.

An attack spell?!

* * *

Eliane was standing on the edge of the stage to the audience's right, atop a set piece meant to represent a cliff. They'd taken the balcony from the first half and covered it in paper and cloth so that it resembled a steep precipice.

She played her part, looking down at Ralph with worry as he fought the dragon, but her attention never left Felix. The person next to him wasn't a guest but a female student. And it wasn't Bridget Greyham, either. It was the unremarkable Monica Norton, another member of the student council.

What is that bland girl doing, sitting next to Prince Felix? That should be my place.

Each time Felix spoke to the girl at his side, it sent waves of dismay raging through her heart. Why was Felix bothering with a girl like that when Eliane was gazing at him with such longing? When she loved him so much? When *she* was supposed to be the one he loved?

Ralph's fight with the black dragon was about to reach its climax. She had to act like she was casting a defensive barrier to protect the hero from the dragon's attack. She couldn't use barrier spells, of course, so it would just be pretend.

This scene employed explosive powder for its special effects. That was what she would use.

I have to make sure they all know—Prince Felix is going to choose me.

The Crimson Wrath—the vestiges of the curse—was making Eliane uncharacteristically aggressive. And now, with no room to think, she shut her ears to the whisperings of her reason and let anger cloud her bluish-gray eyes—let herself move at its whim.

As she pretended to cast a defensive barrier, she unleashed a real wind spell toward the powder. Nobody watching the play would notice that she was using actual magecraft onstage. The clump of air struck the device with the powder, and moments before it burst, it tumbled near Glenn. Now he'd be caught in the explosion.

It's your own fault for making fun of me.

Sparks and smoke went flying toward Glenn.

He wouldn't be badly injured—the powder was just for a special effect. But it would be enough to shock him and make him fall over. Maybe he'd be so scared, he'd freeze up! Naturally, if Glenn stopped moving, the play would stop as well.

And then Eliane would declare in her most sonorous voice: *Behold, I knew that man wasn't the true Lord Ralph! My eyes will not be deceived!*

She would extend her hand to Felix in the audience: *The true Lord Ralph... Look. He's right here.*

If she did that, Felix would climb onto the stage to save the play.

She could simply claim some servant's ineptitude was to blame for the accident with the powder. And then, if she made it seem like her own quick-wittedness had rescued the play from the brink of ruin after an unfortunate accident, everyone would realize that she was talented enough to be with Felix.

Glenn Dudley would look stupid in front of everyone. Monica Norton would watch Felix go onstage and learn who was *truly* best for the prince.

Eliane's face melted into an entranced, dreamlike smile as she looked down on Glenn from the artificial clifftop.

Eliane made two miscalculations.

The first was that she was a novice when it came to magecraft. The wind spell she'd released would do more than simply knock over the powder on the stage—it would provide the sparks with enough oxygen to form a roaring blaze.

The second was that the Silent Witch, an expert at uncharmed magecraft, was in the audience.

* * *

When she realized Eliane was chanting an attack spell onstage, Monica wavered for a moment. She couldn't tell what the girl was aiming at. But she could guess Eliane was trying to attack *someone*, so she followed the actress's eyes to their target.

She was glaring at Glenn, still chanting the words of her incantation. Thinking Eliane might be targeting him, Monica wasted no time erecting a simple barrier around the boy.

It ended up saving him. Eliane's wind spell caused the tiny flame in the special effects powder to burst into a blaze heading straight for Glenn. If Monica hadn't put up the barrier, he'd have been badly burned.

The rest of the audience, ignorant of the situation, seemed to take the events of the last few seconds as part of the performance—Amelia's barrier had indeed protected Ralph from the black dragon's flames.

“I have to hand it to Serendia Academy. What incredible special effects.”

“That wasn’t just an explosive, was it? It was *magecraft*.”

“This year’s play is quite the elaborate affair, using real magecraft for the effects!”

The spectators leisurely expressed their admiration, but Monica had no time to do the same. The emergency wasn’t over yet. While the barrier had stopped the flames from reaching Glenn, the stage was full of wood and paper—all very flammable. Monica poured her focus into solving this problem, working to put out the flames.

Pouring water on fire was the quickest way to extinguish it, but then it would be obvious someone was using magecraft. Instead, Monica covered each of the leaping flames in a small barrier. She used the same basic technique as when she’d put out the Spiralflame, that magical tool used for assassinations. The small barriers kept out oxygen, quickly smothering the fire inside.

Felix watched the play with a serious expression—oblivious to how hard Monica was working to fight the fires before them.

How many more left?! she wondered, her eyes racing across the stage. Just then, she heard a shrill scream from the right. The set piece under Eliane had begun to tilt. The flames had scorched one of its support beams; it was about to collapse.

Oh no! If that piece collapsed, the play would turn into a tragedy—both for Eliane atop it and Glenn below. It might even harm members of the audience. Monica could maintain only two spells at a time, and she was already maintaining two barriers to quench the flames. She was out of options.

During the few seconds she hesitated, the situation worsened. The wind changed direction, causing the smoke from the explosive powder to cover up the stage for a moment. Now she could no longer see Glenn and Eliane.

Monica could hear the wood cracking and breaking past the smoky veil. She was out of time.

No! I won’t make it! Her face paled. Just then something leaped out from the smoke.

It was Glenn, carrying Eliane in his arms.

Flight magecraft...! He'd used a flight spell to rescue Eliane, then burst out of the smoke into the air.

Flight magecraft was rare—not many could use it. And it became far more difficult when you had to carry someone at the same time. But Glenn was pulling it off with ease, sending a commotion through the audience.

Wait... I'm still not done putting out the fires. If I release the barriers now, the fire will only grow!

As Monica panicked, the stage set collapsed. But it didn't scatter out into the audience. A powerful barrier had contained the debris.

The barrier was very precise, safeguarding everyone both in the audience and onstage. The only one who could manage such a feat was a certain master of defensive barriers—the Barrier Mage himself.

Mr. Louis!

Louis must have been waiting nearby, springing into action and putting up the barrier in the nick of time. He took longer to cast his barriers than Monica, who didn't need to chant, but their precision and strength were several levels above anything she, or anyone else, could achieve. Around the time he disengaged the barrier, Monica finished her extinguishing work.

We... We made it...

Monica pressed a hand to her chest to calm her pounding heart and used the other to covertly wipe the cold sweat that had formed on her brow.

* * *

What? What's happening? What's going on?

Now lying horizontally in Glenn's arms, Eliane was very confused. All she'd wanted to do was knock over the explosive powder and surprise Glenn. But then the flames had roared out of control, and she'd burned part of the set. Even worse, they'd scorched the faux cliff she'd been standing on. It was a simple scaffold—the kind that tumbled down easily if the support beam broke.

But just before she was thrown to the ground, she'd felt a different sort of

impact. With a soft thump, someone's chest struck her cheek. Powerful arms lifted her up.

The smoke made it hard to tell what was going on. She coughed, cracked open her eyes—and saw blue sky.

“...Huh?”

“Whoa... We almost didn't make it!”

The voice was astonishingly close.

Finally, she realized Glenn was carrying her. Not only that—they were floating in midair.

What's going on? What's happening here?

“This can get dangerous, so don't let go, 'kay?”

“Wh-what are you...? What is...?”

“Flight magecraft! Gotta say, they didn't tell me about any of this... C'mon, Director! Give a guy some warning!”

Apparently, Glenn thought this was all part of the play, too.

Despite herself, Eliane screamed internally, *Just what does he think plays are like?!*

Below them, the smoke around the stage cleared, revealing an awful sight. The fake cliff had collapsed, and its pieces were scattered all over. It didn't seem to have injured anyone in the audience, though. The papier-mâché black dragon was safe as well.

Only now did Eliane understand what a terrible thing she'd done. One wrong step and not only would the play have been ruined—people could have *died*.

What...what have I...?

She paled and trembled, and Glenn asked if she was okay. He seemed to think she was scared of heights.

“I'm really good at flight magecraft, so don't worry!” he insisted. “But if you're still scared, you can hold on as tight as you like!”

And who would want to hold on to you, exactly?! thought Eliane.

He flashed her an intrepid grin. “Anyway, why don’t we wrap things up here?”

“...Huh? What?”

“You know! Give ’em what they came for and all that!”

A moment later, they were hurtling down toward the stage. Eliane screamed and threw her arms around Glenn’s neck. She was loath to do so, but it was that or fall.

Glenn descended to a spot right above the stage and scooped up Ralph’s discarded sword with his right hand. Then, holding Eliane in his left arm and the blade in his right, he soared above the prop dragon’s head.

“It’s over, black dragon!”

Ralph’s sword pierced the beast’s brow. The actors moving the creature performed one last dying roar, then immediately withdrew to the wing.



“And thus did the Hero King Ralph slay the black dragon and liberate its former lands.”

The crowd went wild.

No history books mentioned anything about Ralph using flight magecraft. As part of the performance, however, Glenn’s spell had a *very* powerful impact.

The applause directed at the stage was nothing like the first half. Everyone was cheering, totally absorbed in the play.

Eliane snapped out of her daze. *Oh, right. I still have a line to say...*

In the last scene, Amelia was supposed to praise Ralph and give him a kiss on the cheek. The thought of kissing any man other than Felix made her sick to her stomach, even if she was only acting. Regardless, she had to carry out her duty.

Shoving her anger and unhappiness back down into the pit of her stomach, she pasted on a beautiful smile.

“May the blessing of the spirits be with you, Lord Ralph...”

Still in Glenn’s arms, Eliane tried to kiss him on the cheek, intending to stop just before she touched him, of course.

However, as her lips drew near, Glenn quickly twisted his head away.

Eliane was dumbfounded as he whispered in her ear, “Hey, you gotta save that for someone you really love.”

Eliane’s pale cheeks flushed a rosy pink.

To the audience, it must have looked like she was hanging her head in embarrassment. The way she was trembling only added to the effect.

But shame wasn’t the emotion raging inside her like a tempest. It was anger.

I was going to kiss him despite not wanting to! And he had the gall to reject me? Him, a mere stand-in?

Her anger was so intense, she felt like sparks were going off in her head.

You’ve shamed me...!

The vestiges of the Crimson Wrath eating away at her were weak—they didn’t

possess even a fraction of the curse's original power. By the time Glenn rescued her, the effect had already dispersed like a single drop of ink in a spring.

In other words, the anger filling her mind now had nothing to do with the curse—this fury was purely her own.

Amid the bombastic applause, she looked up at Glenn, rage burning in her eyes.

This is unforgivable. I shall have my revenge, Glenn Dudley!

* * *

Grand applause welled up from the audience—everyone looked moved. Even Felix clapped heartily from his seat next to Monica.

“That was an incredible play...,” he said before turning to her. “Oh, but you don’t look so well.”

Monica, who had been completely focused on secretly extinguishing the flames, was still holding her chest as her heart tried to pound its way out. “That was really, really bad for my heart... It’s beating so hard...”

“Indeed. I’ll have to ask those in charge a few questions.”

Felix had evidently realized the flames and collapsing set pieces were unintentional.

Please, please don’t let him discover I’m the one who put out the fires...

Felix turned his head to look at the seats behind them. “Dudley is amazing,” he murmured.

“Huh?” said Monica.

The prince continued to stare at the audience. From the side, his face was missing its usual gentle smile. His expression was clear, devoid of emotion, his blue eyes alone slowly scanning the crowd.

“He acted quickly in an emergency and still guided the play to a successful conclusion... Truly an act worthy of a hero who will live on in people’s memories.”

It finally dawned on Monica. Felix was looking at the smiles on the audience’s

faces—smiles put there by Glenn.

The corners of Felix's lips turned up a little. "It must be people like him who are called *heroes*."

His empty blue eyes, thin smile, and quiet voice all unsettled her.

The audience moved as a group, funneling back into the school building. Even in clear weather, the autumn wind was chilly. Monica unconsciously rubbed her arms.

"Presideeent! Monicaaaa!"

Suddenly, she heard Glenn's voice, almost a scream. She turned toward the sound and saw him leap off the edge of the stage and rush toward them. But he wasn't wearing his usual cheery smile. His face was tensed in fear.

"Dudley, what's wrong?" asked Felix calmly.

Glenn swiftly dove behind the two of them. "I need, uh... What do you call it? Right! Asylum!"

"Y-you need asylum?" Monica tilted her head in confusion. The word seemed to imply a pretty dangerous situation.

Using her and Felix as a wall, Glenn hunkered down. Monica wondered just what had happened to the boy who had only moments ago been showered with applause.

In Monica's place, Felix asked, "Dudley, what are you running from?"

"Th-that's, well, my master apparently saw me in the play just now...!"

Monica recalled Felix's words from before. According to him, Glenn was apprenticed to a famous mage.

"He told me never to use flight magecraft without supervision, and I disobeyed! And now he knows about it! This is bad, this is bad, this is *really* bad! He's gonna be furious...!"

Judging from Glenn's terror, his master must be fearsome indeed. "Um, Glenn, your master...," said Monica. "Is he really that scary?"

"Yes! He is! He wouldn't even think twice about grabbing my head and

chucking me out the window...!”

Glenn was tall for his age. What mage could possibly grab his head and toss him around?

Monica was envisioning a huge, muscle-bound man when Glenn’s eyes flew open as wide as they could go. “Gyaaaahhhhh!” he shrieked. “M-M-Master...!”

Then there was a muffled *thump*—the sound of a ball of compressed air slamming down right on top of Glenn’s head. It wasn’t meant to be lethal, but its force was no joke. Glenn made a “whoof” noise and fell to his hands and knees. Monica could tell it had hurt.

As she began to tremble, she heard a familiar voice behind her.

“Oh, hello, Glenn,” it said. “What, I wonder, could possibly make you want to run away the moment you saw your master’s face?”

Wait. Wait! No, it can’t be... Can it? thought Monica, turning around.

And there he was, just as she’d suspected—her “fellow Sage” Louis Miller, the Barrier Mage.

Without so much as a glance at Monica or Felix, Louis grabbed the back of Glenn’s head in one hand and dragged him to his feet. He might have been a thug off the street based on his behavior. And yet he looked so handsome and attractive. It was hard to watch.

This made perfect sense to Monica. Louis could definitely grab Glenn with one hand and throw him around. And he wouldn’t hesitate to do so, either. Monica knew just how strong his grip was, how powerful his arms were, and how little mercy he showed to anyone. She felt the pieces fall into place, but that didn’t stop her trembling.

Held up by the back of his head, Glenn began to make excuses, tears in his eyes. “I *had* to use flight magecraft back there! It would’ve been seriously dangerous if I hadn’t, and, um...!”

“Oh yes, of course. I am in no way criticizing your behavior during the play.” In contrast to Glenn’s wailing, Louis kept his tone elegant and refined. But that just made it sound even colder. “That said, I hear you quite frequently use flight

magecraft to get to and from school. Is that right?”

“Urk! How did you know—?”

“I happened to say hello to your parents earlier. I must say, your magecraft skills have really grown. That head of yours still seems utterly empty, however.”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaah! Ow, ow, ow, owwww!”

“Have you forgotten your little mishap? You know, the one where you crashed into my house and cracked the outside wall? Hmm?”

He produced that final “hmm” in a much lower—and scarier—register.

I never expected Glenn to be Mr. Louis’s apprentice! But now that Monica knew, several other things made sense. The boy had transferred in around the same time as her; Louis must have wanted him to act as a decoy so Monica didn’t stand out. And Louis’s ability to walk right into the school festival from the front gates made sense if one assumed Glenn had invited him.

He probably hadn’t told Monica about his pupil because he didn’t want her—with her poor acting skills—to have too much information. If she’d known Glenn was his pupil from the start, she wouldn’t have been able to interact with him as naturally.

B-but how am I supposed to act right now...? Does Mr. Louis realize the prince is here? He couldn’t be so angry at Glenn that he failed to notice, right? wondered Monica, fidgeting.

As Louis proceeded to give Glenn a thrashing, Felix said gently, “Count of Magic Miller, I don’t appreciate you getting violent with a student from my school.”

For a moment, Louis’s eyes narrowed dangerously. He quickly let go of the back of Glenn’s head.

The boy took this chance to run behind Felix, groaning, “P-Presideeent...!”

“Why, look who it is! Your Royal Highness,” said Louis, as if his thuggish behavior moments before had been merely an illusion. He directed an elegant smile at the prince before placing a hand to his breast and turning on the theatrics. “I must say, Serendia Academy’s school festival is truly a sight to

behold. Especially that play just now... How wonderful, and wonderfully *shocking*, it was.”

The Sage was indirectly asking for confirmation that the events of the play had been accidental, but it would take more than this to ruffle the prince, of course.

“The play’s success was thanks mainly to Dudley’s efforts,” he said, turning to look at Glenn behind him.

Glenn’s mood clearly brightened. “Heh-heh.” He laughed, a silly grin on his face. “You think so? Heh-heh...”

Such a simple boy. Louis glared at his easily placated pupil for a moment, then covered up his expression with a smile. The sheer difference between the wickedness with which he stared at Glenn and the friendly smile he offered Felix was incredible.

“By the way, I noticed the play employed a great deal of magecraft,” Louis remarked. “It seems Serendia Academy is quite enthusiastic about the subject... Are you very familiar with such things, sir?”

Felix responded with a reserved smile. “No, I don’t study magecraft, so I have no specialized knowledge. Nothing I could speak of in the presence of a Sage like yourself, at least.”

They spoke as though trading small talk, but beneath the surface, they were probing each other. It was enough to give Monica a stomachache.

When Louis was first ordered to protect Felix, the Sage had fitted a broach with a location-tracking magecraft formula, then sent it to the prince via the king. Louis had assumed that no novice would be capable of deciphering the formula embedded in such a magic item.

But Felix had realized there was a tracking formula in the broach and destroyed it—insisting he’d only broken it by accident. Both of them were denying what they’d done—Louis that he’d placed a tracking formula in the broach and Felix that he’d understood it. She could almost hear their thoughts:

You noticed the tracking formula in the item, didn’t you?

You were trying to use the item to keep tabs on me, weren't you?

Monica held her breath as she watched their exchange. *Why does the prince want to hide his knowledge of magecraft anyway?*

In Corlapton, he'd privately shared with her that he was actually quite interested in the subject—and that he was a huge fan of the Silent Witch.

A lot of nobles dabble in magecraft, and studying it hardly seems like a disadvantage...

After all, those with skill, like Cyril, were highly prized. Serendia Academy even had its own magecraft-related courses and clubs. So why did Felix hide his interest in it? Monica didn't understand.

She'd reported to Louis—through Ryn—that she'd encountered Felix in disguise at the festival in Corlapton. But she hadn't included the secrets Ike had told her that night about his interest in magic.

Her private excuse for keeping these secrets was that Ike had been the one to tell her, not the prince. If she told Louis *everything*, she would be betraying her new friend after their very first night out together.

As she quietly watched Louis and Felix go at it, Glenn chimed in, completely oblivious. "Wait, do the two of you know each other?"

Felix and Louis both shot him very similar types of smiles—the kind that said they weren't going to confirm or deny anything and that he was free to draw his own conclusions.

The one to finally end the conversation was Felix. "In any case, I should get going," he said.

With how busy he was, he only had so much time to allot to a single guest. In effect, he was saying that he had no more time to waste on a mage who supported the first prince.

Louis didn't try to prolong the conversation, either. "Please do give your grandfather my regards," he replied, smiling meaningfully. Felix responded with a smile of his own but said nothing.

Their curt exchange, the tension in the air, the slight variations in their

expressions—all of it pointed to a mutual struggle to distract, deceive, and probe. Just being near them was enough to wear a person down.

As Monica stood by, watching with bated breath, Felix turned to her. “I need to speak with those involved in the play. Please continue to enjoy the school festival.”

“O-okay...”

With a mild bow to Louis, the prince left. Louis, for his part, grabbed Glenn by the nape of his neck, said, “It’s time for your lecture,” and dragged him away.

Left alone, Monica darted her eyes between the two receding figures until a small yellow bird alighted on her shoulder. It was Ryn.

“Silent Witch, excellent work putting out the fires,” she said, her chartreuse eyes gazing up at Monica—they were the same color in her human form.

Staring back into those vivid irises, Monica whispered, “Um, Miss Ryn?”

“Yes?”

“I guess, um, Glenn is Mr. Louis’s pupil, huh...”

The bird moved its little head up and down. She’d probably been sworn to silence by Louis, and Monica had no intention of criticizing her for it.

But there *was* something she needed to ask. “Could it be that Glenn...um, doesn’t know anything about the mission?”

Glenn had looked completely clueless the whole time Louis and Felix were facing off. It was possible he was ignorant even of the contention between the first and second prince’s supporters.

The yellow bird answered plainly. “Does Lord Glenn seem like the type of person who would be able to support you from the shadows? Or join in any sort of undercover mission?”

“...Well, no.” For better or worse, Glenn seemed basically incapable of harboring ulterior motives. He was an indiscreet, cheerful, and altogether straightforward young man.

“Lord Louis told me he sent Lord Glenn here to camouflage your arrival.”

Felix had assumed Louis was sniffing around and had put up his guard. If Monica alone had transferred immediately afterward, he'd have suspected her of being the Sage's pawn. So Louis had sent Glenn in at the same time. If Glenn—his pupil—was to show up, Felix's caution would naturally be directed at him, and he'd be less likely to suspect Monica.

"In addition, Lord Glenn knows nothing of this."

"....."

Then Louis really did send his clueless pupil here as camouflage. Talk about heartless.

"If Lord Glenn knew of your identity and the mission, he would likely fail to keep it a secret," said Ryn. "I believe remaining silent on this point is for the best."

"...I agree."

While she was shocked to learn of Louis and Glenn's connection, Monica was secretly relieved that Glenn didn't know who she really was. He wasn't being friendly merely because of the mission—he had no idea of her identity, and yet he had still approached her and treated her kindly.

She was happy to learn that when he'd said he was her friend, he hadn't been lying. If possible, she wanted to remain friends with him.

I have to keep my true identity hidden...

Monica was finding it surprisingly difficult to imagine letting go of her current life.

* * *

Serendia Academy's faculty room was inundated with guests going in and out, one after another. The youngest staff member, Lindsey Pail, watched their faces out of the corner of her eye as she prepared some black tea.

The guests were Serendia Academy alumni or those with a connection to one of the teachers—all nobles from respected families.

A lot of prominent individuals were going in and out to offer their greetings to Duke Clockford in particular, who was stationed at the back of the room.

Despite the presence of so many other nobles, the duke stood out.

His features recalled the handsomeness of his youth, as well as his grandson Felix. Unlike the prince with his ever-gentle smile, however, the duke always seemed cold, like a lake in midwinter. Anger him even slightly and you'd find yourself drowning in that lake before you knew what had happened.

Duke Clockford was an important man who had contributed much to the kingdom's development, but Lindsey felt a whole lot more fear toward him than respect.

I think I'll just stay out of his sight, she thought, placing the tea on a tray.

Over by a window, sunlight streaming through the glass, the Waterbite Mage William Macragan was having a pleasant chat with the Mage of Violet Smoke Gideon Rutherford. As she set the tea down next to them, Lindsey overheard some of what the two old teachers were saying.

"Ah, speaking of, I just heard from Louis," remarked Rutherford. "Apparently, that Everett girl is *still* holing up like a recluse."

"Hmm?" replied Macragan.

"She hasn't changed since her time at Minerva's, I suppose... Since she's already graduated, I feel bad nitpicking. But can't anything be done about that shyness of hers?"

Apparently, Rutherford was concerned about someone very shy. *Teachers at Minerva's must have it pretty rough, too,* thought Lindsey. She understood the feeling—she had someone like that in her class, too.

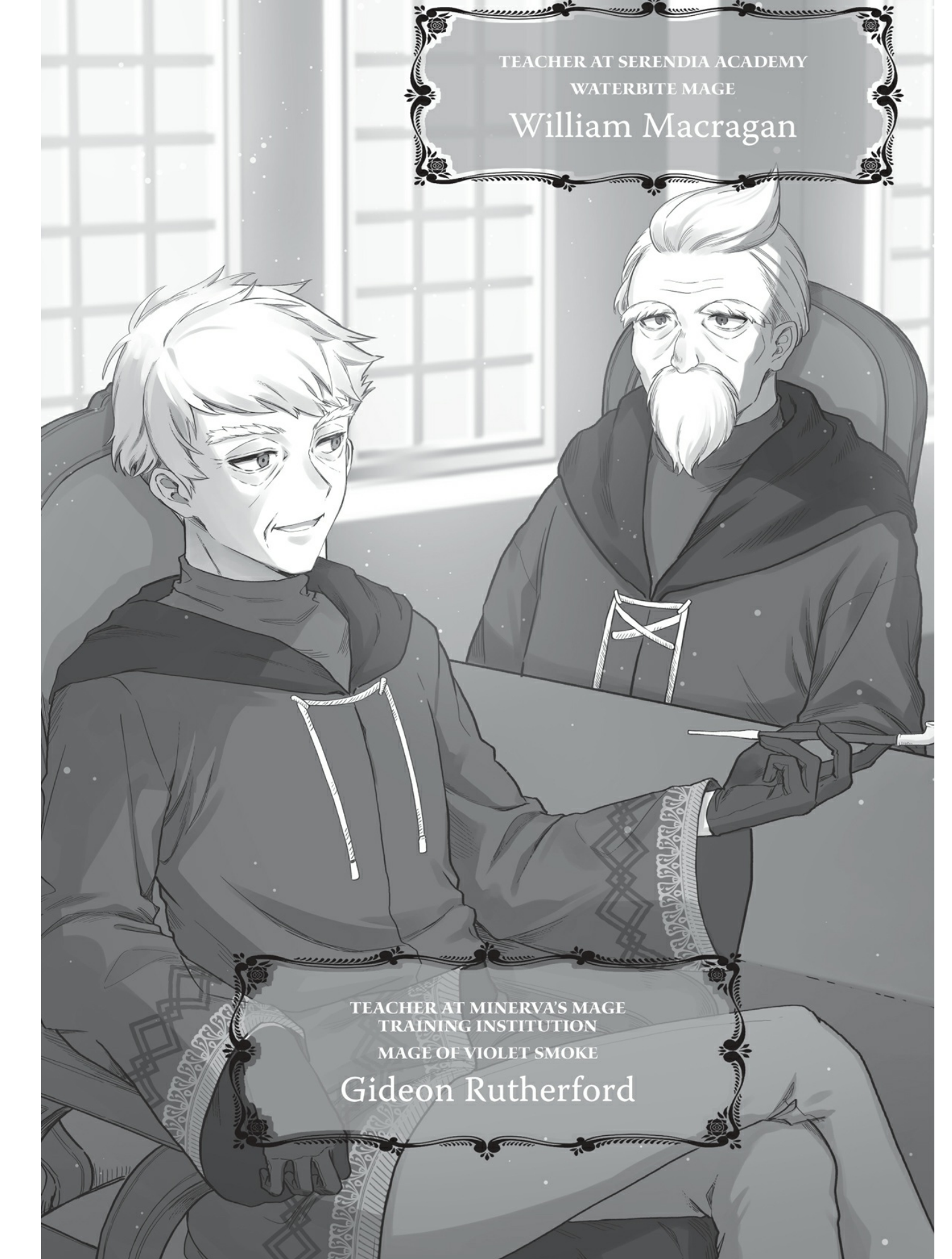
But that girl—Monica Norton—had become a lot more cheerful since transferring to the academy, so she wasn't too worried about her.

Lindsey privately hoped this Everett person Professor Rutherford was so worried about would make some friends. She watched as Macragan picked up his teacup in both hands and said, "Hmm, if it's Everett you're worried about...I have a strange feeling you needn't be concerned."

"...Oh?" replied Rutherford dubiously.

Macragan loudly sipped at his tea, then said in a relaxed tone, "I'm almost

certain she's having much more fun than you think."



TEACHER AT SERENDIA ACADEMY
WATERBITE MAGE

William Macragan

TEACHER AT MINERVA'S MAGE
TRAINING INSTITUTION
MAGE OF VIOLET SMOKE

Gideon Rutherford



CHAPTER 7

He Sends an Invitation Every Year

Trusting Ryn and Nero to guard Felix, Monica left the outdoor stage for the time being. Since she wasn't involved with the play, staying there for too long would draw suspicion.

The Norton family is keeping watch inside the intermediate building, so...as long as I avoid Mr. Rutherford in the faculty room, I can take a look around the school, she thought, heading back inside. That was when she heard a voice call out to her from behind.

"Hey, Lady Norton."

"Oh, a good day to you indeed, Lady Norton."

Monica turned around to see Elliott Howard and his friend Benjamin Mording, the musician. She greeted them with a polite "hello."

Elliott was glancing around and asked, "Have you seen Cyril anywhere?"

"Lord Cyril?" she repeated. She'd seen him twice since the festival started. Very early that morning when he'd given her the floral decoration and when she happened to spot him in the audience during the first half of the play; she hadn't seen him again after that.

When she told them as much, Elliott frowned and scratched his cheek. "It's nothing urgent, but there's something we want him to check on before the ball gets underway... I thought for sure he'd be with you."

"With me?" Monica looked surprised.

"You two are good friends, right?"

Monica gave him a confused look. "It seems to me you're, um, better friends with him than I am," she replied honestly.

For some reason, Elliott looked astonished; his drooping eyes went wide, and his eyebrows shot up. "Cyril and me? Friends? You have *got* to be joking."

She hadn't meant it as a joke or a snide comment, but he still seemed

offended. Monica wasn't sure what to do.

Then Benjamin pounded a fist into his palm like he'd just thought of something. "Oh, I see. You're a transfer student, yes? So you wouldn't know how the two of them were before."

Had Cyril and Elliott acted differently toward each other before Monica's transfer? As far as she knew, they seemed like normal friends. Or not friends, perhaps, but Elliott *did* take a pretty informal attitude toward Cyril. "I thought for certain, um, that they were friends..."

"Again, please stop joking!" Elliott shook his head, scowling. He didn't look offended so much as like he wanted to leave.

Benjamin provided an explanation for the confused Monica. "You know how Elliott is obsessed with the importance of rank and all that, yes? He's proud of his noble position, and he doesn't like it when commoners intrude into aristocratic society. While I consider it an incredible delight to see the noble class accept music born from the masses, he can't accept such things. He's rather hardheaded, you see."

"R-right..."

Monica already knew this. Elliott hated when anyone middle class or below got close with upper-class nobles. It wasn't because he looked down on them but because he considered such fraternization to be counter to the performance of one's role in society. That was why he'd acted so aggressively when Monica first transferred in—although he appeared to have shelved the matter for now.

"Um, but what does that have to do with Lord Cyril?"

"Vice President Ashley is Marquess Highown's foster son," explained Benjamin. "He's part of the bloodline, but apparently, his biological father was without a title."

"...Huh?"

For a moment, Monica doubted her own ears. Among everyone she knew, Cyril seemed especially upper-class—his dignified behavior, his haughty pride, his refined appearance and carriage... She'd never doubted he was a noble by

birth.

“Then, um, he and Lady Claudia aren’t...?”

“Correct,” replied Benjamin. “They’re not blood related. Lady Claudia was the marquess’s only child, so he adopted Lord Cyril to inherit.”

There was a time in the kingdom’s history when magecraft was overly emphasized. Certain families, such as those who had gained their rank because of the art or who traditionally oversaw ancient magic tools, would frequently adopt children talented at magecraft to serve as their heirs. That trend had waned in recent times, and adopting a child to inherit one’s title was now rare. Marquess Highown, however, had apparently persuaded the relevant parties and adopted Cyril.

So then, Lord Howard would... Monica was quickly putting the pieces together. Cyril wasn’t noble by birth, and Elliott hated upstarts.

Benjamin continued, his index finger dancing through the air like a conductor’s baton. “Once upon a time, Elliott and Vice President Ashley were on very bad terms... Or rather, Elliott was always going after him.”

“C’mon, quit talking about that stuff. It’s ancient history.”

“And as Elliott continued this behavior, he met with utter defeat on a certain written exam—”

“*I said*, quit it!” pleaded Elliott, covering his face with a hand and waving the other in the air.

But now that Benjamin had started, he wasn’t about to stop. “After this loss, he very immaturely challenged the vice president to a game of chess. At the time, the vice president had little experience in the game and couldn’t hold a candle to him. Elliott got very cocky, saying, ‘How can you call yourself a member of House Ashley when you can’t even play chess?’”

“Hey, look. Can’t you just say he lost miserably and leave all that other stuff out?”

Elliott’s remark made clear his rotten personality, but nothing he said could reach Benjamin now. “However, Vice President Ashley hates losing, so that

wasn't the end of the matter. For a whole month, he studied the game furiously, barely sleeping, and then challenged Elliott once again. He came very close to defeating him, too, but his lack of sleep unfortunately led to him passing out right on the chessboard in the middle of the match."

Monica remembered hearing this story somewhere before—it must have been when she reported to the student council that she'd been chosen as a player for the chess competition. Cyril and Elliott had different characters but were well matched in terms of pride. It wasn't hard to imagine them flaring up over a game like that and things getting heated.

"Oh, I shall never forget how frightened Elliott looked at the time!" said Benjamin.

"Please forget. I'm serious."

"In any event, the president mediated, and the two of them made up."

Monica nodded in understanding. This made sense to her.

Elliott, though, looked sick and tired of it all. "Well, we didn't exactly *make up*. I just, well, acknowledged his hard work and persistence, and..."

"And thus was forged a passionate bond of friendship! Quarrels arisen from differences in their birth! A new harmony, born from that conflict, each raising the other up! Ahhh, yes, yes, there it is! A melody has descended upon me! I can weave this into a composition... A new piece of music is born!"

As Benjamin set off into a world of his own, Elliott looked up at the sky with a mournful expression. "I keep telling you we're *not* friends! And the same goes for Lady Norton! I've just been keeping an eye out for the time being—it's a temporary truce! As soon as she slips up, I plan to laugh in her face and taunt her for being a commoner!"

"O-oh..." Monica sort of understood but also sort of didn't. At the very least, she could tell her relationship with Elliott was not as simple as "friendship."

"Ugh... How did we even get on this topic? Oh, right. It's *your* fault, Lady Norton—for somehow thinking Cyril and I are *friends*."

"I'm s-sorry..."

Still, Monica didn't think Elliott and Cyril were on bad terms. She wasn't going to say as much, of course; if she did, Elliott would probably get mad at her.

"At any rate, I'm certain you're better friends with him than I am," he pointed out. "You work together a lot... And weren't you going around the festival together?"

"No, I really only met him for a moment this morning...", said Monica, shaking her head.

He pointed to her floral decoration. "But he gave you that, didn't he?"

Monica looked at him in confusion. "How did you know?"

Come to think of it, she remembered Felix saying something similar. The blue ribbon tying the rose stem was the one he usually wore, but it wasn't so unique that a person would make the connection at a glance. Monica turned it over, thinking his name was written on it or something.

"Wait, you're not aware?" asked Elliott, exasperated. "Those decorations are meant to match the hair or eye color of the giver. For a plain guy like me, I'd probably just grab any old flower and put an inoffensive brown ribbon on it. Cyril's colors stand out, though, so it's pretty easy to tell."

"I didn't know that..." Monica looked carefully at the floral ornament at her breast. The blue ribbon binding the gorgeous white rose *did* remind her of his silver hair and blue eyes. "Oh, I get it... It's *that* kind of charm."

"Hmm? What's that? A charm?"

Monica remembered a book she'd once read a long time ago. It told of a place in the southeast of the kingdom where people would keep part of someone else with them—usually a lock of hair—believing that it would let them borrow that person's strength. Thus, the hair of a famed warrior or mage was a welcome good-luck charm for those going to war. Monica had decided this floral decoration was derived from that tradition.

"If I wear this, I can borrow the giver's strength... In other words, it's a charm that will let me act like Lord Cyril!"

"...Uh? Huh?"

So *that* was why Cyril had said it would prevent her from embarrassing herself. If she could act like him, she wouldn't do anything shameful, even at the ball. "I think I'm feeling a little more confident... Maybe I can, um, be dignified like Lord Cyril if I'm wearing this flower."

Elliott stared at her for a few moments, his mouth agape. Then he slowly bent over and held his stomach. He was trembling.

"Um, Lord Howard?" she asked. "Does, um, your stomach hurt?"

"No, it's... Heh-heh, ha-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha... No, no, it's nothing... Pfft... Lady Norton acting like Cyril... That's... Why, that's the funniest thing I've ever... Please, I'll die from laughing too hard... Pfft-ha-ha..."

"L-Lord Howard? Lord Howard?" Monica wasn't sure what to do—he looked like he was having spasms.

Eventually, he slowly rose and wiped the tears from his drooping eyes. "You might've suggested I was friends with Cyril, but I think this makes us even. Actually, I've got a great way to tease him now."

"...Huh? Um, uh..."

"Anyway. If you see Cyril, tell him I'm looking for him. I'll be around, on the first floor of the advanced building."

"Y-yes, sir!"

Monica bowed slightly and pattered away.

A sardonic grin rose to Elliott's lips as he watched Monica go. *I swear...*, he thought. *Between him, Cyril, and Lady Norton... Everyone around me is a total weirdo.*

He didn't appreciate commoners crossing the boundaries of social class.

But he could no longer reject outright every person who did so.

"I still don't like the music of the masses, though," he said. "Benjamin, if you're going to compose something, *please* make it grand and dignified."

Benjamin didn't answer him. He was already using a tree branch to write out a score in the dirt, lost in the world of music.

After leaving Elliott and Benjamin, Monica found a place away from the crowd. She looked around to make sure nobody could see her, then glanced up at a tree.

“Nero... Are you there?”

“Yup. Right here.”

The black cat climbed smoothly down from the tree and onto her shoulder. Unlike Ryn’s bird form, Nero was pretty heavy as a cat. But they needed to speak in whispers, so there was no other choice.

“Um, I’m looking for Lord Cyril... Have you seen him?”

“Oh, the chilly guy, right?”

Cyril suffered from mana hyperabsorption, so he always wore a magical broach that would release the accumulated mana back into the air. It was converted to ice mana, his specialty, so Nero always referred to him as “chilly,” forgoing names as usual.

“Yeah, I saw him around that huge building,” he said, pointing with his front paw to the grand hall used for balls and ceremonies.

It was connected to the school building by a walkway. Monica and Nero were currently about halfway between the school and the grand hall, where they’d be holding the post-festival ball. Currently, it wasn’t open to the public; staff members were probably inside preparing for the event.

Huh? Wait, but I thought Lord Maywood was in charge of those preparations... Why would Lord Cyril be over there?

Monica turned to look, taking Nero off her tired shoulder and holding him up in the air.

From this position, the cat prodded her in the arm with his paw. “Hey, Monica. There’s a suspicious-looking woman over there.”

“...Huh?”

“Over there. Right over there!”

She followed his gaze and spotted a woman loitering in the area. She was

probably in her mid-thirties—thin, with dark-brown hair, simple clothing, and a stole. She looked a little out of place at an academy for noble children like Serendia. Most of the people at the festival were men and women of high rank or their servants. But this woman didn't look like a noble *or* a servant.

"She's all fidgety and sneaking around... I got it! She looks just like you when you walk through a crowd!"

"I guess I'm just a fidgety, sneaky girl....," Monica said, miffed.

But Nero's comment was right on the mark. The woman was moving along the edge of the path, keeping her head down to avoid eye contact. Whenever she passed a large gathering, she'd dart into the shadows like she was scared, and if a group was particularly loud, she would reflexively hide. As a result, it was taking her forever to reach her destination. Her behavior was just like that of Monica when she made her way through a crowd.

"Something's *gotta* be up with her. She could be an intruder," Nero suggested.

She didn't look like an intruder to Monica, though. If she was an assassin, she'd have dressed less conspicuously. Dressing too plain would make a person stand out even more.

From the side of her downturned face, Monica could make out her expression—clouded, brows lowered. She seemed unsure of what to do. This, too, resembled Monica.

Was the woman having some kind of trouble?

"I, um, I'll... I'll go talk to her."

For someone as shy as Monica, speaking to someone she'd never met took a monumental degree of courage. But she just couldn't leave the woman alone.

Nero looked up at Monica and grinned. "Hey, look how much you've grown! All right. Now get going already!" He jumped off Monica's arm and back into a nearby tree. He clearly wanted her to do this on her own, without any help.

Monica bunched her hands into fists and headed over. She hated crowds. They still scared her. They were full of people she didn't know—it was

frightening.

But when she remembered Lana kindly leading her by the hand through all those people, it made her want to do something similar for someone else.

I'll be okay. Today...I have Lord Cyril's charm with me. She looked down at the white rose on her chest. Cyril would surely speak up if he saw a guest in need. *I'm part of the student council, after all...*

Monica approached the woman, rallied her courage, and called out.

"Um, e-excuse me... I-is there something troubling *yough*?!"

And then she choked.

Monica had failed to live up to Cyril's example, and her spirits fell. Meanwhile, the woman looked at her, unsure. She had plain and simple features—the kind of lady you might see anywhere. Monica thought they were similar in type. Her only unique characteristic seemed to be a mole near her mouth.

The woman lowered her lashes once in hesitation, then quietly asked Monica, "Cyril... Where might Cyril Ashley be?"

Monica's eyes went wide. She hadn't expected to hear Cyril's name. Did this woman know him? "Um, Lord Cyril is in the grand hall right now..."

"The grand hall?"

"I'll... I'll *showph* you there!"

She choked once more.

* * *

As they walked side by side, the woman would occasionally look up from the ground and glance at their surroundings, then anxiously go back to hanging her head.

Monica wondered if she was supposed to talk about something. Her mouth opened and closed, then opened and closed again.

Oof... This is so awkward...

What was she supposed to talk about at times like this? Lana would probably compliment the lady on her stole and make conversation about her clothing.

Felix would probably ask if she was enjoying the festival and if she'd seen the play. He'd watch for her reactions and make conversation on a wide range of topics. Glenn would probably recommend she try some meat from his family's shop.

Monica could imagine what the people she knew would say, but she didn't feel like she could mimic any of them. In the end, she continued to rack her brain, unable to come up with a topic.

Eventually, the woman looked at her and said in a quiet voice, "Are you a student here?"

"Y-yes, that's right! I'm a student!" Monica nodded.

"I'm sorry," said the woman, sounding guilty for some reason. "That was a rude question. It was obvious from your uniform. You just don't...seem very much like the others."

She was right—at Serendia Academy, a commoner like Monica was an anomaly. She could wear the same uniform, but her behavior alone was enough to give her away.

"Do you happen to know Cyril?" asked the woman.

"Y-yes! He works with me a lot!" Monica nodded furiously.

The woman let her gaze drift in hesitation. Finally, she looked down at her feet and murmured, "You're a quiet girl. Does Cyril act haughty with you? Or yell at you or act overbearing?"

"U-ummm..."

Cyril didn't act overbearing just with quiet girls like Monica. Aside from Felix, he pretty much treated everyone like that.

Monica struggled to come up with an answer for a few moments. He *was* haughty and prone to anger. But she knew that wasn't the whole story.

"Lord Cyril is...nice," she said slowly, recalling when they'd first met. "He has been very thoughtful toward me."

Back then, when she'd fallen down that staircase, he'd been worried about her. Nobody had asked him to—least of all her—but he'd looked into the

circumstances surrounding her fall and handed down a fair and impartial judgment.

“He always does a really, really good job teaching me how to do my student council work. One time I collapsed, and he took over for me... A-also, he gave me some really tasty chocolate!”

The woman finally lifted her head to look at Monica.

Monica puffed out her chest a little and touched the white rose adorning her breast. “Lord Cyril gave me this flower, too. It’s a charm to lend me courage, um...s-so I don’t embarrass myself today.”

For a moment, the woman looked like she was about to cry. “Cyril did that..... I see...,” she nearly whispered, coming to a stop.

The grand hall was right in front of them now. But the woman stayed put—apparently unwilling to go any farther.

“Um,” said Monica nervously, “Lord Cyril is inside, so...”

The woman shook her head slightly. “Actually, I changed my mind... I still can’t meet him.”

Despite her words, the woman’s expression was tranquil—she seemed relieved. She lowered her gaze in apology, then looked up at Monica. “I’m sorry. You took the trouble to bring me here, but I... Thank you for talking with me, kind young lady.”

“No, um, I’m sorry I couldn’t, well, be much help...,” replied Monica, playing with her fingers.

The woman smiled faintly. “I’m glad I heard what you had to say. If he can...be kind to a girl like you, then...” She trailed off, mumbling the last bit, then walked off toward the front gate.

She never once turned back toward the hall.

* * *

“E-excuse me...”

When Monica opened the doors to the grand hall and peeked inside, she saw Cyril and Neil busy at work instructing a group of servants. There was a lot to

check before the ball got underway: the amount of food, drinks, and utensils needed; where the band would go and where the chairs would be; and all sorts of other things besides.

Monica wasn't sure if she should speak to them because of how busy they looked, but Neil noticed her and shouted, "Lady Norton! Is something wrong?"

"Um! I needed, um, to see Lord Cyril...," replied Monica, fidgeting.

Neil called Cyril over immediately. The vice president stopped going through his list and walked quickly over to Monica. She felt a chill at her feet.

"Accountant Norton?" he said. "Is there trouble in the school building?"

"N-no, nothing like that. Lord Howard was searching for you, and... He said he wanted you to check on something, um, before the ball and asked me to send you over. He should be on the first floor of the building right now, so..."

"Something I need to check on? Oh, there might have been a change with the band. All right. I'll head over as soon as I'm finished here."

Cyril spoke quickly. His hair, usually tied, was hanging loose, and he still hadn't replaced the ribbon at his neck. It was all proof of how busy he was—usually, he was quite picky when it came to appearances. The chill at Monica's feet was probably because his magic broach was in his pocket. Normally she felt it from a little higher up.

"Lord Cyril, did you, um, watch the play?" she asked.

"I did, but only the first half with Officer Maywood."

Neil grinned wryly. "We were working next to the stage, so I'm not sure you could call what we did *watching*."

"I guess not," said Cyril. "Were you able to see the second half, Accountant Norton?"

Apparently, the two of them hadn't caught the conclusion and weren't aware of all the commotion it had caused. If Cyril knew how badly the stage had been wrecked, he'd probably faint on the spot, so Monica just smiled vaguely and changed the topic. "Um, Lord Cyril... There was a woman a moment ago, um, looking for you."

“For me?” Cyril frowned dubiously.

Belatedly, Monica realized she didn’t know who the woman was—in fact, she hadn’t even asked her name. “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t get her name... Um, she had dark-brown hair and... Oh, and she had a mole by her mouth.”

Cyril sucked in a breath. “Where is she right now?”

“Um, I was with her a few moments ago, but she said she couldn’t meet you yet and left...”

The vice president raised a hand to his face. Through his fingers, she could make out a teary-eyed smile.

“...So she came?” he muttered, so low Monica almost missed it—he was talking to himself, not to her.

“Lord Cyril?” she asked, looking up at him, a little confused.

Cyril hung his head low. “She’s a precious guest of mine. Thank you for assisting her.”

His voice shook a little as he spoke.

* * *

The woman left through Serendia Academy’s front gates, then climbed into a carriage parked next to the school. The emblem on the carriage was that of Marquess Highown, and the vehicle itself was suitably luxurious. *Too luxurious for the likes of me*, thought the woman idly, shrinking into a corner of the seat.

Her name was Myra Wayne. Myra was an altogether ordinary woman in her late thirties. She wore the clothing of a regular townspeople, terribly out of place in the fancy carriage. She understood that, and so she huddled up on the seat, trying her best to touch as little of it as possible.

It would be a while longer before the carriage’s owner, Marquess Highown, returned.

For a time, she looked down, letting her mind wander. Then a thought struck her, and she removed a letter from her bag and unfolded it.

Dear Mother,

The winds have grown colder lately, and we sometimes have frost near the dormitory. His Royal Highness's clothing is thicker now, and I train daily to control my mana so as not to make him any colder. I will continue to devote my energies to molding myself into an heir who will not bring shame on House Highown.

That was followed by another few paragraphs relating recent events.

She'd read this letter several times. In fact, she'd practically memorized it. But she still traced her finger slowly over the neat letters on the page.

She knew that its author rewrote letters several times, revising their contents. It was easy to imagine him worrying over what to write, using the back of discarded drafts to work out mistakes.

Serendia Academy's school festival season is fast approaching again this year. I'm sure you're busy, but if you happen to have the time, please stop by. Marquess Highown has told me he would be willing to arrange a carriage for you.

This year's school festival will be my last. The prince is a skilled leader as student council president, and I will spare no effort assisting him. I hope you will look forward to it.

The weather grows ever colder, so please take care of yourself. Yesterday, I received chocolate made with cutting-edge techniques. Melting it in hot milk to drink is delicious and warms the body. I've enclosed some for you. Please try it out if you'd like.

Love,

Your son

Once Myra had read the letter a fourth time, the carriage door clattered open. A middle-aged man with black hair and a mustache climbed in. It was Marquess Highown, a man of incomparably higher rank than Myra.

"Oh?" he said. "Back already?"

"...Yes, my lord."

"And Cyril?"

Myra softly shook her head.

“I see,” said the marquess, neither acceptance nor rejection in his voice.

If he’d returned to the carriage, he must be finished with his business. But he hadn’t yet instructed the driver to depart.

Myra remained silent as Marquess Highown toyed with his mustache.

“In all honesty,” he muttered, “I hadn’t expected you to want to come to the school festival...” As Myra tried to apologize out of reflex, the marquess quickly held up a hand. “Oh, not to say you’ve inconvenienced me or anything.”

Whether or not she was at fault, Myra would often say she was sorry again and again. Whenever she did something her late husband didn’t like, he would hurl abuse at her and hit her. That was why her gaze always wandered at her feet, and even when she looked up, she unconsciously checked everyone’s faces to make sure they weren’t upset. She was doing it right now, in fact, to the marquess.

He lowered his blue eyes and continued. “It always seemed to me that your son...that Cyril was too much for you.”

The words were like a knife to her heart. She covered her face with her hands and looked down. “Yes, you’re right, my lord. He’s just... He’s too much like his father.”

Myra’s husband had been part of the Ashley family’s bloodline, though he hadn’t held any title. Even so, he’d acted arrogantly, bragging he was of noble blood. This had alienated his peers, lost him his job, and eventually driven him to drink until his body failed and he died.

Their son looked just like him. He’d *always* been too much for her.

“...Every time he talks proudly about having the best grades in school, I get so afraid that he’ll end up like his father.”

When he was young, Cyril had probably just wanted her praise, for her to tell him what a good job he’d done. Easy, commonplace words—but Myra couldn’t even manage that. She could never quite shake the uneasy feeling that if she were to praise him, he’d grow up into a man like his father.

“If only his grades had been average. If only *he’d* been average...”

But Cyril was a hard worker. And he was talented, too. He kept putting in the effort, believing that if he worked hard enough, he’d get that praise from his mother eventually. When Marquess Highown acknowledged the results of his labor and proposed financial support and adoption, Cyril probably thought this:

Now my mother will praise me. She’ll finally be pleased.

Myra, however, had pushed him away.

“Ahhh, you truly are the son of a noble.”

She’d never forgotten the hurt that filled Cyril’s face when she said that.

“To tell the truth, today... I wanted to meet him one last time, then never see him again.”

Cyril sent a letter every month, so she was up-to-date on her son’s life. He’d been selected as the second prince’s aide, became the student council vice president, and lived a fulfilling life as a student—behaving as would befit a noble child. He was doing just as everyone expected of him.

Cyril was living life as a proper noble. Myra had wanted to believe he no longer needed a commoner for a mother.

“But...the girl I met earlier had nothing but praise for him. She said that he was...kind to her.”

The girl had clearly been meek, reserved, and plain. But even she had earnestly complimented Cyril, fidgeting all the while.

Myra sniffed and spoke with difficulty, her voice hoarse. “She said Cyril had given her a flower.”

When her husband was still alive, he would often berate her until she cried. Then, young Cyril would say, “Mother, I think looking at pretty flowers will cheer you up,” and he’d go pick some for her.

Cyril always did things like that. He wanted to make her as happy as he could. And yet she’d spurned him. She hadn’t replied to any of his letters, either. She hadn’t even opened the chocolate he’d sent her.

“After hearing what she had to say, I finally realized...I was so afraid of my husband’s shadow that I never tried to see my son for who he really is.”

Marquess Highown looked out the window, as if to gaze at the scenery. He knew Myra would wither if he looked at her directly. Keeping his eyes averted, he spoke softly, as if to himself. “Cyril has always wanted approval, ever since I met him. That’s why he’s so driven to improve himself. When he realized he would never match his sister Claudia’s knowledge, he decided to study magecraft and gain a weapon all his own.”

By the time the marquess realized Cyril was *too* driven, the boy had pushed himself to the point of contracting mana hyperabsorption. At the time, he’d been *terrified* that his adoptive father would abandon him.

“He is still immature in some respects, but he is earnest, hardworking, and wants to better himself. In time, I plan to officially instate him as my heir.”

The marquess paused, gauging Myra’s reaction. He was a smart man. He didn’t try to hurry along her understanding—he simply waited in silence. Myra had always been grateful such a wise and kind man had adopted Cyril.

“...Thank you, my lord,” she said in a ragged voice.

The marquess nodded and continued. “I have no intention of forbidding Cyril from meeting his biological mother. However, he is always hesitant to return home... I think he’s scared you’ll reject him.”

Myra’s hands balled into fists on her lap. *I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m such a weak mother. I’m sorry I couldn’t put my faith in you.*

As she shook, not saying a word, the marquess gently made a suggestion. “I think you should write him a letter. When two people fall into conflict, it is best to patch things up with haste.”

Then he signaled the driver to leave, and the carriage lurched off. Myra closed her eyes, letting herself feel the shaking. A fond memory played in her mind’s eye.

“Mother, why does that man always hit you?”

“Now, Cyril. He’s your father. Don’t call him ‘that man.’”

“I just don’t understand. I would never hurt someone I cared about. If they were crying or depressed, I’d make them a sweet, delicious drink.”

“I see. Well, then, if there’s ever a girl you like, I hope you’ll do that for her.”

He’d remembered her words. He hadn’t forgotten.

Idly, Myra decided that once she got home, she would finally open that package of chocolate. Then, while drinking it, she’d write a letter to her son.

In it, she’d ask him to come back home for winter break, if he was willing.



CHAPTER 8

Heartless Witch

As the student council president, it fell to Felix to question those in charge of the play. While the audience had considered it a delightful spectacle and the powerful performances a rare treat, those behind the scenes knew that it had been one unexpected event after another.

According to his investigation, the explosive powder used for special effects had been blown over by a sudden gust of wind. The support staff all insisted that it had been fixed tightly in place, but given how spectacularly the stage had collapsed, it wasn't clear if they were telling the truth.

Thankfully, it hadn't resulted in a full-blown fire, but if Glenn hadn't known how to use flight magecraft, he and Eliane would both have suffered terrible injuries.

"Oh, sir, I was just so frightened."

Once he finished asking questions, Eliane drew close to him. She looked up at him, beautiful tears trickling down her face, clearly wanting him to comfort her.

That was enough for Felix to more or less guess what had happened. *Ah, so she's the one. And she was probably behind the previous Ralph's injuries, too.*

How foolish, he thought, his gaze cold. Still, he made a show of being considerate. "But the play was a success, thanks to your and Dudley's skilled acting. Your performances as Ralph and Amelia were quite fitting for the kingdom's first couple."

"...Thank you so much."

"Oh, speaking of Dudley. Where *is* your hero?"

"I wouldn't know, sir." This mention of Glenn caused Eliane's mood to visibly drop.

I feel bad for Dudley, but making him the standin was the right choice.

Felix had known since the day Glenn transferred in that he was an apprentice

to one of the Seven Sages. That was why the prince had recommended him for the role—if Eliane were to try anything, he figured Glenn would be able to handle it. And the oblivious boy had met Felix’s expectations wonderfully.

The Barrier Mage has been snooping around my business, so I was wary of his disciple...but he has proven quite useful, thought Felix. Pondering this in the back of his mind, he ordered the play staff to remove the ruined set. Eliane looked at him like she wanted attention, but the prince was a busy man. He didn’t have any time for her.

But when he turned to leave, intending to finally help set up for the ball, Eliane tugged on his sleeve. “Prince Felix, I... Would you do me the honor of dancing with me this year?”

Felix almost laughed. *This year, indeed.* Eliane came to him every year, wanting his first dance. It was an annual event at this point.

And turning her down wasn’t an option. She was his second cousin and leading marriage candidate, supported by Duke Clockford himself.

“Of course,” he replied. “If you should wish it, I shall accept.”

That was the safe reply, and normally, it would have satisfied her. That day, however, she was being awfully persistent. “I’d like a promise, sir... Something visible.”

It was clear what she was asking for—a traditional floral decoration. She was pleading for one.

Felix had never once participated in this tradition. Not only was he busy, he also needed to change dance partners as the situation demanded, and sometimes guests would take priority. Moreover, if he gave someone a floral decoration, it could be taken as a sign that he’d decided on his marriage partner.

For a moment, an image of a certain girl flashed through his mind. Monica had told him, with that stilted smile of hers, that the white rose at her breast was a charm to prevent her from embarrassing herself.

He wondered what kind of face she’d make if he told her it was actually an invitation to dance.

If Felix gave her a yellow rose tied with a blue ribbon and asked her to dance with him, how would she react?

Her cheeks wouldn't flush red like Eliane's. In fact, she'd probably turn white as a sheet and shake her head so hard, it would practically fly off, all the while stammering that she couldn't do it—that it was far too much for her.

A charm, Cyril? That's playing dirty. And when Felix didn't even have the freedom to give someone a rose...

He heard a scraping at the back of his mouth. *Oh no. I can't put on an attractive smile if I'm grinding my back teeth, can I?* he chided himself, reforming a pleasant expression for Eliane.

I've no particular interest in those floral decorations, but...

Behind his smile, he was thinking of the girl who had played with his heart that night in Corlapton.

"Right now, I'm a ghost! I don't exist. I'm just a ghost named Monica, so...!"

Her small hand, extended to him in embarrassment.

That gentle, awkward invitation she'd made out of consideration for him.

"Let's enjoy the rest of the night as ghosts together, I-Ike!"

If he was going to give anyone a flower, he wanted it to be her.

Wouldn't that be so much fun?

* * *

Once he'd dealt with Eliane, Felix stopped by the school building to do the final pre-ball checks. It was nearly winter, and the sun set early. The sky outside the windows was already dyed in the orange hues of early evening.

Before long, the bells would ring to signal the end of the public portion of the festival. The students would all go back to their dorms, get dressed, and head to the evening's ball. He'd be heading back to his dormitory, too, as soon as his final inspection was finished.

The prince was headed down a hallway on the first floor, thinking about the evening's arrangements.

“Sir,” came a voice from behind him.

Felix stopped. A slender young man with silvery hair tied neatly behind his neck was hastening toward him—the vice president, Cyril Ashley. *Come to think of it, I haven’t seen him much today*, thought Felix. In years past, he’d always stuck by the prince’s side, insisting on guarding him.

“Hey, Cyril,” he replied. “I haven’t seen you around much today.”

“I’m sorry, sir. My hands have been rather full,” said Cyril, lowering his brows apologetically. Then something caught his attention, and he gasped. “Excuse me, sir, but...there’s a bug in your hair.”

Just as he reached out toward the prince’s head, something black jumped through the window and onto his arm. The creature hissed sharply at him. It was a black cat with golden eyes.

“A cat? It must be a stray...,” said Cyril. “Please wait a moment, sir. I’ll chase it away.”

With a troubled look, the vice president lowered his arm and tried to catch the cat. Unfortunately, as he knelt and reached out his hand, the animal used his head as a springboard and leaped, rushing past Felix.

“Why, you...!” Cyril cried out in irritation before catching sight of something behind the prince. His eyes went wide.

Felix had heard footsteps as well; slowly, he turned around. As the evening sun’s orange light filtered in through the windows, a petite girl with light-brown hair walked toward them. It was Monica Norton, the student council’s accountant.

The cat ran to her, and she scooped it up without a word before letting it out the window.

Is it just me, thought the prince, *or does her expression seem awfully blank right now?*

Felix was about to call out to her, but Monica spoke first. She looked at Cyril standing behind him. “Lord Cyril,” she said, “um, there’s something I wanted to talk about. Can we go to another room...?”

“Has there been some trouble?” replied Cyril.

Monica scampered up to them and played with her fingers. Her plodding way of running, childish gestures, and nervous, downcast expression were the same as usual.

“Um, no trouble,” she said. “But there’s something really important I have to tell you before the ball...” She clenched a fist in front of her chest, then looked up at Cyril with an urgent expression. “It has to be you, Lord Cyril! P-please!”

Her desperate eyes were fixed on Cyril alone—as if she had something important to reveal to him. She didn’t even spare a glance for Felix.

The prince unconsciously clutched the fabric at his chest. He felt something deep inside him spark and smolder.

“All right. I’ll hear what you have to say,” said Cyril.

“Th-thank you. Um, I don’t want other people to listen in, so, over here...,” said Monica, tugging on the hem of Cyril’s jacket.

It was very rare for her to reach out for anyone, much less tug at their clothes. *Why do I feel something twisting in my chest?* thought Felix.

“All right,” said Cyril. “We’ll do this immediately. Please excuse me for a moment, sir.”

“Sure,” said Felix, unconsciously raising a hand and covering his mouth.

He didn’t want them to see that he wasn’t smiling like the calm, kind, perfect prince he usually was.

* * *

Monica led Cyril to an empty classroom and faced him, her back to the windows. The light from the evening sun shone from behind and cast a shadow on her face.

Cyril squinted against the brightness. “What did you need to talk about?” he asked.

“.....”

Monica said nothing. Her childish face was expressionless—like when she was

confronting equations or a chessboard. Cyril furrowed his brow in irritation.

Just then, they heard the ringing of bells. The festival was now closed to the general public, and the students would start returning to their dorms, leaving few people in the school building.

Ding-dong. Ding-dong. Ding-dong...

With the final ring came a dry, crackling noise—the kind of sound only heard when someone cast a lightning spell.

Before the sound of the bells had faded, a golden light emerged around Cyril, and he quickly found himself locked inside a cage of lightning.

“What... What’s the meaning of this, Lady Norton?!”

“Lord Cyril would never call me Lady Norton. He always calls me by my full name or my student council title.”

The evening sun cast her youthful face in shadow, and yet her eyes sparkled with a hint of green.

In a voice devoid of all emotion, she quietly asked, “Who are you?”

Monica liked it when Cyril called her Accountant Norton. It made her feel like he’d acknowledged her as a student council member, and she automatically sat up straight when she heard it.

So when the man in front of her called her Lady Norton, she felt an awful twist in her heart.

“You would put me in a cage just because I called you something different?” he demanded. He glared at her from inside the prison of lightning, looking for all the world like the real Cyril. His strong-willed expression, perfectly neat silver hair, and slender build—in terms of numbers, he was almost exactly the same.

But Monica knew better. “Have you been wearing that ribbon tie since this morning?” she asked.

“...Why? What about it?”

“Because Lord Cyril’s ribbon is right here.” Monica touched the floral decoration at her breast with a fingertip.

Even more damning was the broach the man was using to fasten the ribbon. Cyril was afflicted with mana hyperabsorption, and he wore a magical broach to release excess mana.

“Lord Cyril’s broach is a magical item,” she said. “But that one isn’t.”

She could tell in an instant by using a detection spell. It was well-made, but it was ultimately a surface-level fake.

Monica continued dispassionately, as though cornering an opponent in chess. “I saw Lord Cyril by himself in the audience during the first half of the play. But he told me he was working with Lord Maywood at that time.”

The Cyril she’d seen in the audience was, in all likelihood, an imposter. This man must have been biding his time, waiting for a chance to get close to Felix.

Monica had a vague idea as to who he was, too. “Why did you think this lightning cage was mine as soon as you saw it? I never chanted a word.”

Most people, upon seeing unchanted magecraft for the first time, assumed that someone hidden nearby had used the spell. There was only one person in the world who could cast without an incantation, and not many people would see Monica and make that connection. But this man had been certain the lightning spell was hers.

“You knew it was me because you’ve seen my magecraft before—at the chess competition.”

The intruder who fled the competition had looked exactly like Eugene Pitman, the teacher from Minerva’s. Monica had assumed at first that the man just happened to look like him, but she’d been mistaken.

“Illusion spells can’t be maintained for very long while moving. But you’ve been using Lord Cyril’s appearance for some time now. Is it body-manipulation magecraft? Like the dragonshifting spell from last time?”

The man’s lips slowly curled into a crescent moon-shaped grin. His slender throat quivered with hoarse laughter. His voice was like honey boiled down and scorched—exactly the same as the intruder at the competition.

“Heh, heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha! Well, I suppose you aren’t one of the Seven Sages

for nothing, Monica Everett. To be honest, I still can't believe it. To think the Silent Witch is such a tiny little thing!"

Monica, too, was in a state of disbelief. As far as she knew, body-manipulation magic was mainly used for closing up small wounds or temporary bursts of physical strength.

But at the competition, this man had transformed into a whole other person using dragonsifting magecraft, and now he'd made himself look just like Cyril. He was even modifying his bone structure and pigmentation.

I'd heard rumors about the Empire's body-manipulation magecraft, but...I had no idea it was this advanced.

She'd heard that the Empire started allowing research into body-manipulation magecraft about a year ago as part of its development of healing magecraft. Monica was a researcher of magic formulae, so she knew this man's techniques were *not* something one could develop in a single year. The necessary research must have started much earlier—though she didn't know if it was on a national scale or if this man had done it all himself.

What I'm more concerned about...is his objective.

If he was trying to assassinate Felix, there would have been other ways to do it. The man's actions didn't add up, neither here nor at the chess competition.

"Are you really trying to assassinate the prince?" she asked, not expecting a straight answer.

As she'd figured, the reply came in the form of mocking laughter. "Why not try and force the information out of me?"

"Then you have no intention of submitting?" she asked, her voice hard.

The man withdrew his grin. He shot her a cold-eyed glare, then said in Cyril's voice, "Do you think you can attack me, Accountant Norton?"

Most people would experience psychological resistance to attacking a person who looked like their friend or loved one, even if they knew it wasn't them. This man understood that and was using it to provoke Monica—adopting a voice and expression meant to trick her mind into believing she was facing off with

the real thing.

But Monica didn't hesitate. "Yes, I can."

She fixed him with an impassive stare—the same one she'd direct at a chessboard—and spoke in a voice devoid of emotion.

"I just need to think of you as numbers."

Purposely altering her perception, Monica absorbed herself in the world of numbers. All she saw was numbers—a human body made up of numbers. As long as she was off in her world of numbers and magecraft, she could be as strong and as heartless as she needed.

The man clicked his tongue and twisted his face in annoyance—Cyril's voice and Cyril's face. But none of this could shake Monica's resolve. The sounds and changes in expression registered to her only as numbers.

Trapped inside the lightning cage, the man swung his right arm.

"...Then what about this?" he said, hurling a small vial he'd had up his sleeve at Monica.

Did it contain poison? Acid? Whatever it was, it flew between the cage's bars, straight at her.

* * *

The man pretending to be Cyril—Ewan—smiled, assured of his victory. The vial held a highly volatile poison. When the glass broke, the poison would spread through the entire room, and anyone who breathed it in would begin to lose consciousness and fall to the ground.

Ewan would have no problems, since he'd built up a resistance to the poison, but this little witch wouldn't stand a chance. Even if she put up a defensive barrier, the poison would melt into the air, easily passing through. And if she used one specifically targeting poison, she'd have to maintain it constantly.

While Monica was distracted by the vial, Ewan called his partner, Heidi, into the room; she'd been waiting just outside, wearing the Serendia Academy uniform and pretending to be a student. She'd almost finished chanting her attack spell in the hallway.

An arrow of lightning appeared at her fingertips. She aimed it at the Silent Witch.

How will she handle this? wondered Ewan.

The Silent Witch's eyes were focused on the vial flying toward her. Just before it struck the floor at her feet, a gust of wind blew through, catching it. She must have decided to stop the vial before it broke, instead of using a barrier to block it.

It wasn't a bad choice—but now Ewan was confident he'd won. He quick-chanted a spell and chuckled to himself. *This is checkmate, little girl.*

Battle was just like chess. You only had so many moves.

While there were a few exceptions, mages could generally only maintain up to two spells at once. Just like a knight fought with a sword in one hand and a shield in the other, mages tended to do battle by maintaining one offensive and one defensive spell at the same time.

Right now, the Silent Witch was maintaining the lightning cage pinning Ewan down and the wind spell to stop the vial. In other words, she was defenseless.

Heidi would finish her incantation and fire her attack spell. At the same time, Ewan would dragonshift to subdue and disable Monica. It was over.

"Strike, lightning!"

As Heidi chanted the final words of her spell, fifteen lightning arrows flew at the Silent Witch all at once. The attack was impossible to avoid.

Monica didn't move. She just looked at the arrows, no expression on her face.

She murmured something, as if talking to herself. But it wasn't a chant. "... Analysis complete."

Crackles and soft pops began to ring out. The lightning cage around Ewan extended lengthwise, thinning out and changing shape.

What's this?

The lightning spell eventually narrowed into ultrafine threads, then spread out in a radial pattern in front of Monica. After that, more threads formed,

crisscrossing and connecting the others.

It was a spider's web, made from lightning magecraft.

All the lightning arrows Heidi fired were caught in the glittering, golden web. Not only that, but they melted away like hot sugar, becoming one with Monica's spell. It devoured the arrows—all in less than a second.

Ewan and Heidi were both speechless. They'd never seen nor heard of any magecraft that could eat someone else's spell like that.

The Silent Witch spoke to fill the silence, her voice still flat. "A Cargodian magicule layout favored by the Durandese magecraft school of the Empire. Easy to abbreviate, quick to activate..." Her green-tinged eyes stared at them through the golden spiderweb. "Its flaw, however, is how easy the arrangement is to read. It's simple to absorb by deploying a spell with the same arrangement."

Just by hearing the final phrase in Heidi's chant, the witch had grasped what family the spell belonged to and its magicule arrangement and created a matching web. Theoretically it was all possible, but it could hardly be accomplished in a matter of seconds.

Ewan felt a chill run down his spine.

The golden web strung through the classroom glistened in the dim light. Just beyond it was a true predator whose power they couldn't hope to match.

Heidi courageously tried to attack her with another spell. But before her chant even finished, the web extended to capture her. Each of its shining strands was an ultrathin lightning spell, and Heidi yelped as she was electrocuted and fell to the floor.

And all the while, the Silent Witch didn't so much as turn in her direction. Her eyes were still on Ewan; she'd taken Heidi out almost as an afterthought.

Ewan was a mage with the rare power to freely reconstruct his own body with body-manipulation magecraft. People called him a monster for it.

But in Ewan's opinion, this little girl was far more monstrous.

So this is the power of the Seven Sages of Ridill...!

He quickly changed tack, activating his dragonshifting spell.

...Don't let her get to you. The web isn't really that lethal. His slender arms, made to look like Cyril's, swelled and expanded, and blue scales appeared over his skin. The bone structure in his fingers changed; his nails extended and sharpened, like a dragon's hooked claws.

Not only did dragonshifting cause a dramatic increase in one's physical abilities, it gave the user a powerful resistance to magical attacks, like dragons had.

A simple lightning spell won't be enough to stop me.

Covering his weak point—the spot between his eyes—with his left hand, Ewan advanced. The Silent Witch's unchanted magecraft was incredibly swift to activate, but he'd determined it didn't have that much punch behind it. The enclosed space made it especially difficult to wield more powerful spells. If he just guarded his forehead, the witch's attacks were no threat at all.

"Graaah!"

His claws tore through the golden web. His arms tingled as it shocked him, but it wasn't enough to stop him from moving. He'd be able to break through.

As he came within striking distance and raised his arm, he felt it suddenly hit against an invisible wall. There were walls all around him, none of which he could see—most likely some type of barrier meant to seal him inside. It was far stronger than the water sphere he'd used last time. Even his strengthened claws would have a hard time piercing it.

Trying to lock me in so you can buy time to call your little friends?

In that case, he just had to destroy the barrier before she had the chance. Even the strongest barriers could be brought down with a series of high-density mana-based attacks to a single point.

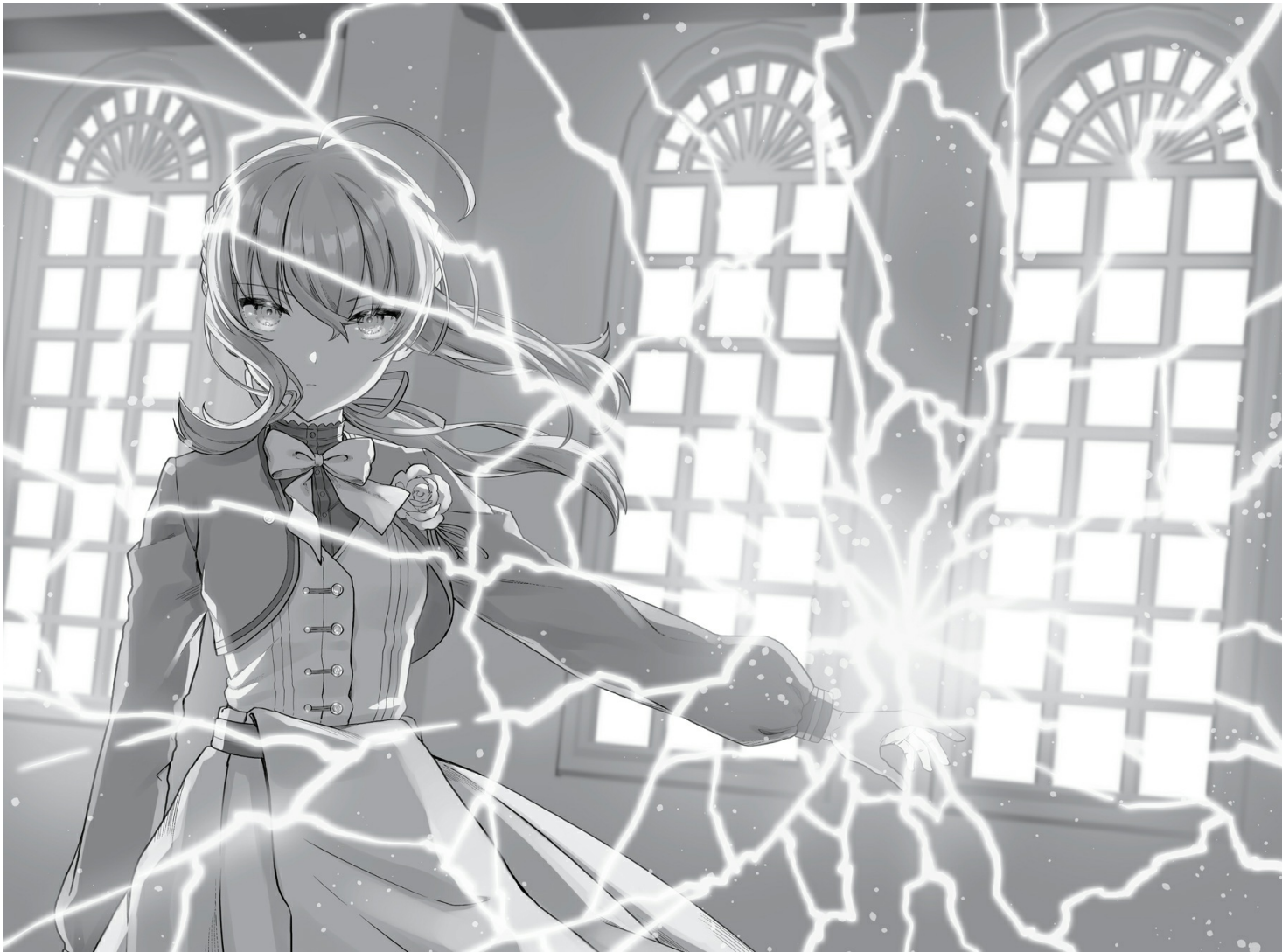
But before his claws could shred the barrier, the Silent Witch mumbled, "If I combined this with my ultra-small fixed-coordinate axis flame spell, I could use it to bake cookies, too."

"...What?" grunted Ewan despite himself.

The witch looked straight at him—there was no warmth in her eyes. “But dragons are weak to the cold, so I’ll do this instead.”

A moment later, the temperature inside the barrier plummeted. Monica was using ice magecraft to chill only its interior.

Save for a select few species, dragons were much weaker to the cold than humans. When a dragon’s body temperature fell, their movements grew extremely sluggish. Since Ewan had dragonshifted, that applied to him, too.



His consciousness wavered; he felt like he was in an icehouse. “Guhhh... Urgh, ah...” He scratched madly at the barrier with his long, sharp claws. Unfortunately, his fingers rapidly weakened, and eventually, he collapsed against the barrier wall.

His vision blurred as he looked up at the Silent Witch.

The girl, still not yet fully grown, impassively observed the scales covering his body. Her eyes were those of a researcher. She was trying to read and understand his magecraft.

Those are most definitely not the eyes of someone looking at a fellow human.

Ewan could turn off the part of his mind that recognized people, instead seeing them as mere targets to be killed. The Silent Witch could do the same, registering people only as bunches of numbers.

Was there even a difference?

Ewan moved his numb lips into a sardonic smile. “You mercilessly take human lives like capturing pieces on a chessboard... So this is who you really are, Monica Everett—Silent Witch.”

When the man with Cyril’s face and voice confronted Monica with her own cruelty, it caused her thoughts—occupied with analyzing the dragonshifting spell—to dull ever so slightly.

He’s probably right.

Monica could see people as bunches of numbers, which meant she could hurt them without feeling so much as a pang of guilt...whether she wanted to or not.

No matter how much she tried to be like kindhearted Lana, she’d never really be the same.

Monica Everett saw others as numbers—she was a heartless witch.

And yet...

If that allowed her to protect those she cared about, what need did she have to show mercy in the face of malice?

Monica used an ice spell to bind the arms and legs of the fallen pair to the

floor. *Now I just have to call Miss Ryn and report to Mr. Louis and—*

“Excellent work, my fellow Sage.”

“Oohyah?!” she yelped at the sudden voice from the window.

She whipped around and saw Louis sitting in the frame, tapping his staff against his shoulder and smiling. When had he arrived?

He dropped from the window frame with sprightly movements, brushing his long braid off his shoulder and onto his back. From behind his monocle, his purplish-gray eyes swiveled to look down at the two fallen intruders. “Is the dragonsifter the same one who snuck into the chess competition?”

“Y-yes, sir... Um, it looks like he uses body-manipulation magecraft both for dragonshifting and for disguising himself.”

“Hmm,” mused Louis, his eyes sharpening dangerously. “Then they’re from the Empire after all...”

Thick laughter overlapped his words. The fake Cyril was chuckling from where he lay on the floor, his throat moving in spasms.

“Heh-heh. Ah-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Without batting an eyelash, Louis jammed his foot down on the back of the man’s head. After twisting and pressing the sole of his shoe into the man’s skull, he said in a very polite voice, “You’re quite grating on the ears, so would you mind being silent for a moment? If you wish to talk, you can do so in prison.”

“My, oh, my,” said the man. “Are you sure you have the time to be so...*relaxed*?”

Sensing a sinister implication in his words, Monica immediately cast an unchartered detection spell. She didn’t pick up any suspicious mana from the two intruders, but as she expanded her spell’s range, she felt something odd coming from near the boys’ dormitory.

Flame mana, steadily swelling, whirling. She’d seen this before.

“Spiralflame?!” she cried out.

Louis’s eyes widened. “Ryn!” he barked.

Ryn's voice came to them a few seconds later. *"I've spotted what appears to be a Spiralflame next to the boys' dormitory."*

Even now, Ryn's voice was flat and passionless. Louis tsked and glared out the window. "May I leave these two with you, my fellow Sage?"

"Y-yes, sir!"

As Monica nodded, Louis quick-chanted a flight spell and leaped out the window.

The Spiralflame was a magic item meant for assassination, and its greatest asset was its power. It was even strong enough to break through Monica's barriers.

But Louis was the Barrier Mage—he'd be able to seal it off completely. The man was a talented flier as well, so he was sure to get there in time.

After Louis left and silence returned to the room, the male intruder addressed Monica once again. "Hey, little runt."

Monica watched him closely, ready to attack if he showed the slightest sign of chanting or any other suspicious activity.

Still face down, he twisted his neck to look up at her. "Could it be you never considered there might be more of us?"

He's bluffing, Monica decided calmly. He was trying to divert her attention, looking for an opening to escape. *The Spiralflame is a threat, but Mr. Louis won't have a problem dealing with it. Miss Ryn is keeping watch on the prince, so I should stay put.*

Even if the man *did* have friends, and even if they attacked Monica to try to rescue their compatriots, she could use her unchanted magecraft to deal with them.

"Look, little runt, aren't you curious about how the real Cyril Ashley is doing?"

"...Huh?"

The last place Monica had seen the real Cyril was the grand hall. She hadn't seen him at all since then.

Ewan saw how her shoulders twitched.

“My friends are watching us as we speak,” he continued. “If you attack me further or if I give the signal...they’ll take the true owner of this face and kill him.”

“...And that is how the intruder is threatening the Silent Witch,” said Ryn’s voice in Louis’s ear as he used flight magecraft to head to the boys’ dorm.

“He’s bluffing,” Louis replied. “Leave it be.”

His colleague may lack some key human qualities, but she was intelligent. At least, she wasn’t stupid enough to fall for such an obvious lie. Louis continued on his route to the dorm, taking the least visible path he could manage and leaving the intruders to Monica.

The sun had almost completely set, and indigo was beginning to seep into the sky above. It was only a matter of time before the colors of night subsumed the orange still visible on the horizon.

Louis felt the cold of the coming winter in the wind against his cheeks, but he opted not to deflect it with a barrier. Instead, he used a detection spell.

This is...

Louis’s considerable combat experience with the Magic Corps made him better at detection spells than Monica, and he immediately noticed something off about the results. The mana response he’d picked up certainly *seemed* like a Spiralflame, but upon closer observation, the mana’s expansion was unnatural.

It’s a decoy!

Magic items were on the whole terribly expensive. Those as strong as a Spiralflame were especially difficult to obtain.

The magic item near the boys’ dorm was probably something cheaper made to look like one. The mana would swell, whirling and churning, but never explode.

Still, any magic item that produced so much as a modest flame had the potential to cause a fire. With Ryn unable to divert her attention from the second prince, it fell to Louis to retrieve it.

He scowled. He didn't like this situation at all. *It's as if the enemy has me dancing in the palm of their hand.*

It was obvious that if they suggested the existence of a Spiralflame in that situation, Louis—who excelled in barrier techniques—would go to retrieve it. *Was the decoy meant to distract me—to get me away from there? If so, then their motive is...*

A thought occurred to Louis, but at that very moment, Ryn's voice reached his ears. And she sounded uncharacteristically desperate.

"Lord Louis! The Silent Witch, she's...!"

"Don't you care what happens to Cyril Ashley?"

The man's words disrupted Monica's thoughts.

She had an excellent mind for calculation, and those calculations were telling her this was a bluff.

But her heart argued back:

What if he's telling the truth?

Then Lord Cyril, he'd...he'd die...?

She knew she had to remain calm and carefully scrutinize the man's claims, but her mind wasn't working properly. She felt a cold sweat on her back. Her heartbeat was pounding in her head.

Cyril was always helping her. Even if it wasn't much, she wanted to show her thanks by doing her best at the school festival.

"Let's do everything we can to, um, make the school festival a success. Okay?"

That's what she'd told him. But she still hadn't done anything.

"No... No, that's..."

"This is no empty threat, dear," said the man. "You know what happened to Eugene Pitman, don't you? The one I became last time?"

The teacher from Minerva's whose form this man had taken at the chess competition had been found brutally killed. Her opponent was more than capable of murder, without a shred of mercy or pity.

No, no, no...!

As Monica stood there at a loss, the man with Cyril's face laughed in a way totally unlike Cyril. It was a derisive laugh, one meant to bully. "If you value Cyril Ashley's life at all," he said, "then disable your spell."

I have to buy time until Mr. Louis gets back, she thought. But how...?

Shaken by the man's rambling, Monica failed to notice the other intruder—the woman with the dignified eyebrows—chanting ever so softly.

Her spell produced a small flame, which was slowly melting the ice binding her right arm. Eventually, once the ice was thin enough, she freed her hand, opened a vial hidden in her sleeve, and rolled it over to Monica's feet.

Inside it was the same highly volatile poison the man had thrown at her a few minutes ago. And by the time Monica noticed the awful stench, it was too late.

"...Ah, argh...ugh, ah...?"

The back of her head tingled, and her vision began to distort. Knowing she was under attack, she immediately tried to deploy a magical formula.

Unfortunately, with how hazy her mind was, she couldn't manage the necessary calculations. All those beautiful equations and formulae twisted, broke apart, and collapsed.

"Ah...agh...ahhh..."

She crumpled to the floor, her limbs twitching, as the pair of intruders destroyed the remaining ice and stood up.

"We have *two* objectives," said the man. "The first is the second prince. And the second..."

He knelt down beside Monica, snatched her up by her hair, and brought his face close. He wore a cruel smile.

"...is to secure the Silent Witch, Monica Everett."



CHAPTER 9

Drawer Full of Treasures

Her consciousness drifting in and out, Monica ruminated on the man's words.

Secure me? Why?

She couldn't voice the question; it escaped her lips as mere groans.

But the man went on, as if in answer. "I'm a mage, too, dear. And that's how I know that unchanted magecraft is superhuman."

For Monica, unchanted magecraft was a hard-won solution to the problem of speaking in front of others. Its quick casting time was convenient, but it didn't have any other benefits to speak of.

But the intruder, in his singsong voice, extolled her ability. "It's a miracle, really. I'm quite sure my master would be very happy to have it... After all, we've already accomplished our other goal."

...Other...goal? The man had said he had two goals. The first was the second prince. The second was Monica. *They already accomplished what they wanted with the prince? What is he saying?*

So she was right. The man *wasn't* after Felix's life. But then why had he pretended to be Cyril to get close to him?

"Ewan, were you able to confirm it?" asked the woman with the dignified eyebrows.

The man she'd called Ewan gave a slight nod. "I wasn't able to make direct contact, but I got a good look up close, and I saw the traces. It's the work of the traitor Artur. The prediction we were given was correct after all."

Artur. When the man said that name, obvious strains of anger and loathing crept into his otherwise detached voice.

He wanted to check something about the prince up close? That was his goal? But why? What traces? Artur? Who gave them a prediction...? Monica's thoughts were racing as she tried desperately to stay conscious.

But her mind was too hazy to process the information. It kept scattering away, like water cupped in her hands, draining out between her fingers—the terms, the information, everything.

“Let’s withdraw before the Barrier Mage returns,” said the man. “The drug, Heidi.”

“Here, Ewan.”

The woman with the dignified eyebrows—Heidi—took a vial out of her uniform pocket and handed it to Ewan. He took it and waved it in front of Monica’s eyes. A clear liquid sloshed around inside.

“This is just something to make you a good little girl.”

The vial likely contained a highly addictive drug. As soon as she ingested it, Monica would be overwhelmed by a powerful intoxication. Then, when it ran out, she would experience withdrawal symptoms and seek the drug out in larger quantities. She knew people used such substances to essentially make others their slaves.

She quickly gritted her teeth, trying to resist.

But Ewan easily pulled her weakened mouth open as Heidi brought the vial to her face.

Then, just as the first drop was about to fall onto her lips, there was a voice from the window.

“You harmed my master? Oh, you are in for it now.”

Perched on the windowsill was a tall, thin young man in an old-fashioned robe, his black hair cut short and his golden eyes blazing.

“Ne...ro...,” Monica croaked.

Nero pounced with superhuman strength, crossing the room instantly and delivering a brutal punch to Ewan as he held Monica down. Then, as he bent to pick his master up, Heidi slammed the vial into his face.

Nero showed little reaction. He simply lapped up the drug dripping around his mouth.

Heidi's thick eyebrows flew up in shock, and her eyes went round. "One lick should have knocked you out instantly..."

"You think this dumb drug is gonna work on *me*?"

Holding Monica in his arms, Nero looked contemptuously at Ewan and Heidi. From his throat came an almost reptilian, hissing exhalation. A black fog began to cover up the left side of his body. He was so angry, his transformation was coming undone.

"How dare you lay hands on *my* master, foolish humans. I hope you're ready. I'll grind your bones to dust."

"If you harm us, I'm afraid we can't guarantee Cyril Ashley's—"

"Ha!" Nero cut him off. "What about it? I don't give a crap what happens to anyone besides Monica."

The pupils in his golden eyes were too slender to belong to a person. His harsh, inhuman gaze flitted between his prey.

"You can beg for your lives all you want. I don't care one bit about either of you. Now *die*."

Nero's fogged-up left half regained its human shape. Leaning forward, he launched into a sliding run, using his empty hand to grab Ewan's face and dig his fingers into it. He tried to use this momentum to slam the back of the man's head against the wall but couldn't. He frowned.

"The hell is this?"

Nero's fingers began to sink into the skin of Ewan's face. It felt like they were stuck in clay. He instantly extricated his fingertips.

Ewan raised a hand to his twisted, mushy face. It no longer contained so much as a trace of Cyril Ashley.

"Well, that was just *rude*," said Ewan. "Creating a face takes *so* much time and effort, too." His voice came out muffled, probably because the region around his lips was all twisted up.

He used both hands to knead his skin, smoothing the distortions out along his skull. The result was a face Monica had never seen before, flatter than was

common in Ridill. But Monica couldn't be sure if it was his actual face or that of someone else entirely.

Nero opened and closed the hand he'd used to touch the man's face and scowled. "What *was* that? When I grabbed him, he got all melty and gross."

Her mind still hazy, Monica managed to squeeze out a warning. "Nero, be...be careful... He's using...body-manipulation magecraft..."

The man's magecraft—both his dragonshifting and his ability to transform into other people—were unknown variables. They couldn't afford to underestimate him.

Nero, now on guard against the man's techniques, stopped attacking and observed his enemies. They didn't immediately lash out—they'd probably realized that Nero was no ordinary human.

Eventually, Ewan spoke up, breaking the stalemate. "Come here, tall, dark, and handsome. Let's make a deal. I'll give you the antidote for the drug in her system...all you have to do is let us go." He took out a small vial and wiggled it for Nero to see.

Nero shot him a wicked grin. "I don't make deals with people I don't like. If you have the antidote, I'll just kill you and steal it. Boom, problem solved."

"My, how scary. In that case, why don't we do it *this* way?"

The vial slipped from Ewan's hand. With a shrill crack, it broke, spreading pungent white smoke everywhere. Probably some kind of poison.

"Heidi and I have built up a resistance, so this won't affect us," said the man. "But it will prove *quite* difficult for the Silent Witch."

"...!" With a gasp, Nero looked at the girl in his arms.

She didn't have his resistance to poison—she was a normal human being. And she'd already been hit with a different drug.

"Ack-hah...," she coughed. "Argh, ahhh... ugh..." She writhed in his arms, clawing at her throat.

Nero jumped out the window to get Monica away from the smoke.

Ewan's shrill laughter followed them. "See you, Silent Witch, dear. And...her knight in shining armor, I suppose?" He paused. "And once you've both realized the terrible truth, we'll meet again, I'm sure."

Past the white smoke, the sound of Ewan's and Heidi's footsteps faded. They probably intended to run back into the hall and escape through the campus.

They're going to...get away...!

As she lay, tormented by her powerless state, Monica caught the sound of someone muttering. The voice didn't belong to Ewan or Heidi. Nor was it Nero's, Ryn's, or Louis's—it was gloomy, as if it wanted to curse the whole world.

"The most awful pain you've ever felt in your lives... I will re-create it for you."

She heard the thud of someone falling to the floor. A moment later, Heidi's scream pierced the smoke. "Ewan!"

As the poisonous smoke drifted out the window and cleared, Monica spied Ewan, writhing on the classroom floor. A purple emblem had appeared on his cheek—a shamanic seal borne by those inflicted with a curse.

"It's hot! Ahhh, it's hot, ahhh! My skin! My skin, it's hot, it's hot, agh! Stop! Stop, stop, stop, stop! Gaaah!"

Foam began to form at the corners of his mouth as Ewan shouted at the top of his lungs. Then something crept in from the window and entangled him and Heidi as she sat at his side.

They were plant vines in a poisonous shade of purple. They coiled around the two intruders' bodies, then dragged them out the window.

What...? What's going on...? Monica shifted her heavy head to find the origin of the coiling purple vines.

They were coming from a small flowerpot. They'd probably been roses before. Now, though, the flowers were mottled with black and purple, each petal expanding like fleshy gills, quivering as they grew.

They'd been infected by a curse and warped into something aberrant.

Holding the flowerpot to his chest, standing a short distance away from

Monica and Nero, was a young man with purple hair, wrapped in the garments of the Seven Sages. It was Ray Albright, the Abyss Shaman.

His pink eyes glared eerily into the nighttime darkness. “Only a third-rate shaman curses to kill... A true Albright inflicts pain and suffering on the living without letting them die...”

“Ewan! Ewan!” Heidi flailed about with a knife, desperately slicing through the purple vines constricting her and her comrade.

But Ewan kept shouting and yelling. The seal on his cheek was slowly eating away at him.

“Know the bottomless despair of the abyss and suffer...!”

Ray pointed a slender finger toward Ewan. The seal on his cheek glowed even more brightly, and his shouts turned into piercing screams.

This was the Abyss Shaman, the man whose terrible, cursed arts allowed him to conduct any form of torture—and without leaving a scratch on the victim’s body. While the shamanic arts were much like magecraft, its techniques were the sole property of House Albright and its head, Ray. Thus, magecraft could do nothing to stop it.

Ewen eventually bit back his screams and gritted his teeth, his eyes turning to glare at Ray.

“Very good, my dear Saaage... This hurts a little too much to call a draw...” He huffed and puffed, Heidi supporting him from the side as she quickly chanted a spell.

A wind whipped up around the two of them. Flight magecraft.

“Fine, then,” spat Ewan hatefully. “We’ve accomplished one objective... You’ll be the ones who know despair in the end—when your precious nation is embroiled in the flames of war...!”

Heidi, holding him, used her spell to float into the air. It was extremely difficult to carry someone while flying, however. Especially when that someone was a big man—much bigger than her. They swayed dangerously in the air like a bird on the verge of death.

Normally, Monica could have easily shot them down. But with the poison interfering with her mind, she couldn't use even beginner magecraft properly. And Ray was an expert in shamanic arts only—he couldn't use techniques meant for regular mages like flight magecraft.

“Nero... Follow...them...,” begged Monica, grasping her familiar's robe.

Nero frowned down at her. “And leave you here like this?”

“I'll... I'll be fine, so... Please...”

He made a sour face but eventually gave in. He lowered her to the ground, sitting her up against the wall of the school building. “Can't disobey my master's orders. Hey, you, purple guy! Don't you dare let Monica die.”

And with that, he ran off like a gust of wind. She wasn't sure how far he'd be able to pursue the intruders, but it was better than doing nothing.

“What was that supposed to mean?” grumbled Ray, evidently unhappy at being called “purple guy.” He picked up the flowerpot with the transformed roses and walked over to Monica.

By now, the flowers were completely black and withered. He looked down at them sadly. “Ahhh... They've wilted... A girl recommended these to me, too... I bought them to commemorate her talking to me...”

The flowerpot contained rose seedlings—the gardening club was selling them. Looking more closely, Monica saw a stuffed animal and a bag of cookies from the charity bazaar sticking out of the pocket of his robe. Apparently, he'd been enjoying the school festival in his own way.

Ray's gaze shifted from the withered flowers to Monica. “I don't know what's happening,” he murmured, “but they looked like bad guys, so I cursed them...”

“You...saved me,” managed Monica.

“Were they assassins after the second prince's life?”

She wasn't sure how to answer him. The duo's objective hadn't been assassination. What traces had Ewan found on Felix?

When she tried to tell him she didn't know, all she managed was a shallow groan. She still wasn't breathing correctly, and she'd pushed herself too hard

trying to speak. Plus, there was still some poison mist left in the area, and the wind blew it in her direction from time to time.

As her face went blue and she gasped for air, Ray started to panic. “S-Silent Witch! Um, what should I do...?! I only know how to curse... But what am I supposed to curse...?!”

“You should curse the assassins who caused this situation.”

“I already did!” shouted Ray before gasping and whipping around.

Standing behind him was Louis, his staff on his shoulder. His hair was a mess—he must have been flying pretty fast.

“Geh! The Barrier Mage...,” said Ray bitterly.

Louis silenced him with a smile, then narrowed his eyes at Monica, who sat against the wall of the school building. He performed a quick chant, then he lifted his staff, enclosing Monica and Ray in a clear barrier—probably to shut out the poison smoke.

Normal barriers were made to let in a certain amount of air so that those inside could breathe. But if the air itself was toxic, the poison would enter the barrier—a big flaw. Creating a barrier that would let in only clean air and keep the toxic substance out was extremely difficult. But Louis pulled it off—and while quick-chanting, too. His skill was befitting of his title.

Monica took slow, deep breaths, taking in the clean air. Eventually, she lifted her heavy eyelids and looked up at Louis.

He stared down at her, frowning. She couldn’t blame him. She’d let the assassins escape.

“Mr. Louis,” she said hoarsely, whimpering. “I’m... I’m sorry, I...”

As she sniffled and looked down, she saw the white rose decoration affixed to her chest. Seeing it only made her cry harder. She was useless.

“It would have...been so easy if I just thought of the numbers, but... But when they used Lord Cyril as a shield like that, I couldn’t... I couldn’t do any calculations...”

Enemy or ally, if she replaced all those around her with numbers, she could

make even the most difficult of calculations in a flash. She could make calm, rational decisions.

But she hadn't been able to overwrite the people around her—the kind people she'd met at this school—with mere numbers. She'd lost the ability to do so.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry..." she repeated, sobbing.

Louis used a finger to push up his monocle and made a bitter face. "This failure was a strategic mistake on my part. I should have better read the situation. I am not so narrow-minded that I would push responsibility for that onto a little girl like you."

"But..."

"Your *humanity* matters little to me, my fellow Sage."

His tone was cold, but it sounded to her like he was saying he didn't mind if she was a cruel person who saw others only as bunches of numbers. If she was, or if she wasn't—either was fine by him. This roundabout way of expressing himself was typical of Louis, and Monica smiled wryly despite herself.

"And anyway," continued Louis, looking over at Ray. "It's precisely because you didn't treat him like a bunch of numbers that our dear shaman here came to rescue you, yes?"

Ray bared his teeth at Louis, glaring threateningly. "*You* may not treat me like numbers, but you *do* treat me like a slug... I know all about it, don't you worry..."

"Ah-ha-ha!"

"You're supposed to *deny* it, damn it! H-how are you such a horrible person? Maybe you're the one I should have been cursing all along—"

"About House Albright's missing items," said Louis, cutting off the shaman's muttered complaints.

"Geh!" Ray yelped, his pink eyes widening.

Louis flashed him a handsome smile. "I'm sure you'll help us guard the prince in the future, right, my dear shaman?"

“Y-you haven’t a shred of human decency... Threatening a colleague? You’re positively heartless...! Damn it, damn it! One day I’ll curse you... I’ll curse you to stub your pinkie toe once every five minutes!”

“Wouldn’t it be faster to simply shatter my legs?”

“And you call yourself a m-mage...? How violent...!” Ray shuddered.

Smoothly ignoring him, Louis removed a small object wrapped in paper from his robe pocket. He pressed it into Monica’s hands in what was, for him, a gentle manner.

“Mr. Louis? What’s this?”

“It’s from someone else you couldn’t treat as numbers.”

Her fingers still tingling, Monica gingerly undid the wrapping. Inside was a white handkerchief—it was plain, except for the yellow flowers embroidered along the edge.

“.....Oh.”

A cheerful grin flitted through her mind.

“Yellow flowers symbolize happiness where I’m from, so we embroider them a lot.”

“Sorry I won’t be able to...teach you horseback riding or make you that embroidery.”

It belonged to the girl who had once plotted to assassinate the second prince, whom Monica had caught and who had subsequently left the academy—the daughter of Count Bright, Casey Grove. Even knowing the details of the attempted assassination, Monica hadn’t been able to abandon her. After negotiating with Louis, she’d managed to have her sent to a convent.

Casey... Casey, you remembered...

Tears fell onto the cute yellow flowers that reminded Monica of spring. As she gripped the handkerchief, she realized something.

She’d never be able to see someone important to her as numbers ever again.

“The world is filled with numbers.”

Her father had left her those words. She couldn't allow herself to use them as an excuse or an escape.

* * *

Louis informed her that he, Ryn, and poor Ray, who had gotten dragged along, would be acting as security for the ball that night. "I am not diabolic enough to foist this job on a little girl who was just poisoned," he said to her. "Go back to your room and get some rest."

Monica had taken him up on the offer, going back to her attic room and lying down.

Outside, the sun had completely set, and tiny stars twinkled in the indigo sky. They were especially vivid that night—perhaps because of the new moon.

As she stared at them idly, a dark shadow crossed her vision. It was a black cat—Nero. He deftly used his front paws to open the window and enter the room before jumping onto the bed and looking down at Monica. His face wasn't as expressive as a human's, but he looked somehow disappointed.

"Sorry, Monica," he said. "They got away from me."

According to him, Ewan and Heidi had boarded a carriage hidden along the way and used it to flee. While in human form, Nero possessed superhuman strength in his legs, but even he couldn't catch up to a galloping horse.

"...Oh," said Monica. "But that's okay. The Abyss Shaman's curse won't fade for some time."

According to Ray, it would last for a month at least, sporadically causing intense pain. They wouldn't have to worry about Ewan attacking them in the meantime.

Slowly catching her breath, Monica continued. "You helped me so much today, Nero. Thank you."

"Are you okay now?"

"Mm-hmm." Monica nodded, sitting up in bed.

She wasn't back to normal yet, but she'd recovered to the point that she could get up and walk around.

As she climbed out of bed, Nero said in a rush, “Hey, shouldn’t you get some more rest?”

“No, I have to get to Lana’s room...and get ready for the ball.”

Nero’s tail froze in midair. His golden eyes went wide. “You’re barely standing! That awful Lountatta guy can handle the security, so—”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said, quietly interrupting. She wasn’t going to the ball as security detail. “I’m going because I want to,” she said, scrunching up her face. “After all, I won’t be around next year.”

Monica bent down in front of her desk and opened the locked drawer. When she’d first arrived at school, its only contents had been her coffeepot—a memento from her father.

Now it was a drawer full of treasures.

My precious treasures, she thought.

The letters and ribbon from Lana. The book and pendant from Felix. The embroidered handkerchief from Casey. And the white rose decoration adorning her breast.

None of them had been given to the Silent Witch. They’d been given to a small, plain girl named Monica Norton.

She closed her eyes, as if she was praying. *I’m sorry, I’m sorry...*, she thought. *Just for now... Just while I’m here at this school, forgive me...*

Who was she apologizing to? Louis, who had sent her on this mission? Or the friends she was deceiving?

...All of them, most likely.

At some point, Monica had begun to find the idea of letting go of her time as Monica Norton very difficult—even though she knew she was deceiving everyone.

I just want...to be Monica Norton for a little longer.



CHAPTER 10

I Am Yours

Monica finally talked her way past Nero and arrived at Lana's room, where her friend stared hard at her, eyes huge.

"You don't look very well," she pointed out. "Are you feeling all right? Do you need to rest?"

Monica had been trying her best to keep her back straight and her expression normal, but apparently her complexion was so poor that Lana noticed with a single glance. She told Lana she was just tired from all the fun at her first school festival and convinced her to go ahead and help her get ready.

The dress Monica was borrowing for the ball had been altered quite a bit at Lana's father's instruction. It was a calm green with a streamlined design, its upper part featuring minimal ornamentation. Fabric overlaid with lace formed the skirt, which flowed beautifully toward the hem. With every step she took, the lustrous cloth rustled and swayed.

On the whole, the dress was cute, but not too childish. It had a casual beauty without being overly flowery. Everything about the garment, down to its minor details, had been calculated, and even Monica—who knew nothing about such things—could tell that it suited her.

Finally, Lana tied Monica's hair with a ribbon the same color as the dress, weaving it into a braid. Then Lana took the final section of her friend's hair and worked it into another, thinner braid.

"What, um, are you going to do with that braid?"

"Heh-heh." Lana smiled with satisfaction. "Just you wait."

First she loosened the braid a little; then she wound it up and fixed it in place with a pin. Now complete, the braid formed the shape of a flower.

"That's amazing!" exclaimed Monica. "My hair looks like a flower!"

"This style is *very* fashionable right now," bragged Lana. Her own hair was

done into a flower shape on the side as well.

Monica couldn't stop her face melting into a silly grin. "...Hee-hee. We match."

"W-we do indeed! Cute, right?"

"Mm-hmm. Hee-hee."

Lana hadn't used any fancy barrettes or clips to do Monica's hair, yet it was still pretty. Above all, it looked very intricate.

Once Lana finished setting her friend's hair, she began to skillfully apply makeup to Monica's face. Compared to the chess competition, it was a little thicker and more noticeable.

When that was done, Monica affixed the white rose decoration to her dress at the chest. The white flower looked beautiful against the dress's simple design.

"Vice President Ashley should be delighted to see you all dressed up!" said Lana as she put away her makeup kit.

Monica tilted her head in confusion. *Why would Lord Cyril be delighted?* she wondered. Maybe it was because she wouldn't embarrass the student council now that her appearance was in order.

As Monica proposed this answer to herself, Lana looked at the decoration, the corners of her lips tugging up into a grin. "Do your best out there," she said.

"...U-um, okay?"

* * *

Eliane had opted to purchase a new dress for the night's ball. It had been tailored by a craftsperson of some renown, and its pink color and light, airy fabric perfectly brought out Eliane's lovely, delicate charms. She'd done her soft hair up in a cute style, scattering flower decorations throughout it. Her servants had all complimented her, saying she looked like a fairy princess.

She was the prince's second cousin, considered one of the three most beautiful girls at Serendia Academy, and the heroine of the play earlier that day. As soon as she stepped into the ballroom, all eyes should have been on her.

And she did hear praise—but it was directed elsewhere.

“Ahhh, Lady Bridget truly brings color and beauty wherever she goes.”

“Lady Claudia is so gorgeous... It’s as though I’m looking into a different world when I see her.”

Eliane followed the crowd’s gaze. The first person she saw was Bridget Greyham, the daughter of Marquess Shaleberry and student council secretary. She was having a calm, casual discussion with a guest.

The design of her dress wouldn’t have worked for just anyone—it was grape, with lace and a low neckline—but it looked natural on her, even stylish. The biggest highlight, however, was her hair, just as brilliant as her dress—those gorgeous blond curls. It was likely her intelligent, elegant behavior that prevented the gaudy outfit from looking vulgar. Most importantly, she recognized all the guests and understood their relationships with one another. She always knew the right thing to say to whomever she spoke with. Conversational skills like that were very hard to come by.

From behind her folding fan, Eliane shifted her eyes to the opposite side of the room. There was Claudia Ashley, the daughter of Marquess Highown, resting on a sofa by the wall, a listless look on her face.

She wore a slender navy-blue dress that perfectly brought out her beauty and class. Her glossy hair was elegantly styled, tied up with a rather large ornament, a single tuft hanging down at her side. Her mystical beauty made even that tuft of hair look exquisite. She sat, impassive as a doll. Every blink or fidget caused the men around her to gaze at her passionately, as though hoping for more.

Everyone was dressed up brilliantly for the ball, but Bridget’s and Claudia’s beauty stood out. Eliane was always counted among their number in terms of attractiveness, and yet she could never measure up to them when compared.

But so what? she told herself. *As a noble lady, I know my family and behavior are just as important. My family is the most noble there is, and my behavior leaves nothing to be desired, even compared to them.*

Eliane flashed a smile at a few boys nearby. They smiled in turn and came to surround her, showering her with compliments.

“You’re like a spring fairy,” one said. “How lovely you look,” said another. “Your charm is more than my heart can take.”

Cheered by their words, Eliane scanned the room for Felix from behind her folding fan. She found him immediately—he was probably the most conspicuous person there and wasn’t hard to spot.

She would have liked to go up to him and ask for his opinion on her dress, but he was busy talking with his grandfather, Duke Clockford. Interrupting them would be a terrible faux pas for a noble lady. Better to hold back instead, naturally making her way toward him until he addressed her first.

He’d never ignore her. After all, she was his most suitable partner.

...Oh?

Suddenly, Eliane noticed a stir near one of the tables in the back. She could see a few girls surrounding a boy. The boy in the center was Glenn Dudley, the very student who had taken on the role of the hero Ralph during the play that day. He was easy to make out even among the gaggle of girls because of his height. Apparently, they were quite interested in him because of his earlier performance.

My, my, what have we here? What, pray tell, is so good about that brutish, vulgar man? How I pity those who shall never receive Prince Felix’s attention.

As she privately scorned the girls making a fuss over Glenn, she listened in on what they were saying. They were all squealing and speaking in high-pitched voices, talking about how wonderful the play was, asking him all sorts of questions and trying to get to know him better.

One of them flushed rose-red, entranced, and said, “Lord Dudley, I heard you’re a pupil of the Barrier Mage...”

“Yeah, that’s right!”

This shocked Eliane. *Wh-what did she just say...?!*

Glenn Dudley was a transfer student in the second year of the advanced course, and his common behavior always made him stick out like a sore thumb. But his personality had its charms, and it seemed he did have *some* friends.

As far as Eliane was concerned, he was a delinquent, not fit to attend the academy. For some reason, though, he was on good terms with some of the student council members, and even Felix seemed partial to him.

A pupil of one of the Seven Sages? And the Barrier Mage, at that—a promising young man well-liked even in high society. Becoming a Sage grants a rank equivalent to Count, and more importantly, a role as an aide to His Majesty... An authority among authorities. Will Glenn Dudley eventually hold the same position?

Half ignoring the praise from her hangers-on, Eliane focused more on the conversation between Glenn and the girls.

“Your outfit today suits you ever so well, Lord Dudley.”

“Eh-heh-heh. My master picked it out for me!”

Everyone could tell that Glenn’s formal wear had been made by a first-rate tailor. His slender jacket was up-to-date with current trends, such as in the shape of the collar and the overall silhouette, and it looked perfect on the long-limbed boy.

Louis Miller, his master, was thought of as very fashionable even by the noblewomen of high society. Glenn’s clothing was every bit as refined and sophisticated as you’d expect from such a man.

It was rather disappointing to see some unruly stray curls poking out, but even among present company, Glenn stood out just as much as Felix—though part of it was just how big and loud he was.

One of the young ladies smiled bashfully and asked him, “Have you decided who you’ll be dancing with?”

“Hmm. I’m not that great at dancing. For now, I just want to chow down until I’m fit to burst.”

The girls giggled at that, seeming to enjoy even his lack of inhibition. Another one asked, half jokingly, “Lord Dudley, what sort of girls do you prefer?”

“Oh! I wanted to ask the very same thing!”

“As did I!”

Yes, I'd very much like to hear your answer, thought Eliane, directing her full attention toward Glenn.

He folded his arms and hummed in thought. Eventually, letting his eyes drift around the room, he answered, "Someone like Amelia, I guess."

Amelia, the wife of the kingdom's founder, King Ralph—the very part Eliane had played earlier that day. Wasn't he essentially declaring that he yearned for Eliane?

Oh! Oh my! Why, you should have just told me that earlier! she thought. And she, in turn, would respond with, *Rather than Ralph, I prefer Prince Felix!*

As she mentally rehearsed this mean-spirited exchange, Glenn's voice reached her ears once again. "I've always been into cool types like Amelia, ever since I read the stories of the first king as a kid," he explained. "Not only is she cool, she's good at her job, and she's always honest when she sees something wrong, telling it the way it is! She'd take me seriously when I had something to say... And if I got hurt, she'd get angry, sigh, and then patch me up anyway. You know—the older-woman type!"

Eliane had to consciously prevent her jaw from dropping.

Every single one of those characteristics was the exact opposite of Eliane. Plus, as a first-year student in the advanced course, she was even younger than him. She hid her face behind her fan as her cheeks drew back in distaste.

The boys surrounding her started asking if she was all right, so she quickly recovered her beautiful, charming smile and looked at them with upturned eyes. "Oh, you've all been complimenting me so much that I finally got embarrassed."

The expressions of those around her all melted away into bliss.

See? she thought. *This is how a lady is supposed to be. Glenn Dudley has no taste. There is such a pretty girl who just acted with him in a play right here, and yet he doesn't even come to say hello, much less compliment me!* If he did turn to say hello to her... And if he did compliment her, she'd be willing to admit he had a *little* taste.

As if reading her mind, Glenn suddenly looked up in Eliane's direction.

Naturally, she had no intention of going over to speak with him. She wondered what she'd say first when he greeted her. Perhaps something like, *Oh, and who might you be, again?*

"Heeey!" called Glenn, lumbering over to Eliane with big steps.

Then he smoothly passed right by her and went over to a petite girl standing near the entrance.

"Oh, I knew it was you, Monica!" he exclaimed. "Is that the dress Lana mentioned? It looks great!"

"Th-thank you... Hee-hee."

Eliane's folding fan fell from her hands, prompting worried remarks from her hangers-on. But she didn't hear a word.

There was a quiet anger in her bluish-gray eyes as she watched Glenn Dudley and Monica Norton.

At this point, she no longer cared about appearances.

So she marched straight over to Felix.

* * *

As Monica spoke with Glenn, she sensed envious glances being cast in their direction. Several other students, mainly girls, seemed to want to talk with him. She figured it was because of the play earlier that day. She grinned wryly to herself as she recalled the huge applause at the end, a stark contrast to the chaos behind the scenes.

"Come to think of it, shouldn't Lana be with you?" he asked her.

"Um, well..."

They'd been together until they arrived at the grand hall. But once they entered, Lana went off to do her own thing, saying something about her presence making Monica harder to approach.

After Monica explained, seeming rather troubled, Glenn quirked his head to the side in confusion. "Who's approaching who now? And what for?"

"I don't really know, either..." Monica tilted her head, equally confused as she

recalled Lana's knowing smile.

She doubted dwelling on it would provide an answer, though, so she stopped. "Glenn, um, your clothes are wonderful."

Though she knew next to nothing about fashion, she still felt that Glenn's formal wear suited him perfectly.

Glenn scratched his head, a little embarrassed at the straightforward praise. "Heh-heh. To tell the truth, my master picked these out for me."

"Mis— You mean the Barrier Mage?" she replied, quickly correcting herself before she could say *Mister Louis*. Glenn didn't know that he and Monica were colleagues, nor did he know who Monica really was.

"I figured we were supposed to wear our uniforms to the ball, so I didn't bother preparing anything. But then, this morning, his contracted spirit delivered a whole outfit!"

Louis had called Ryn away a little before Monica slipped out of her attic room and met Ray that morning. Apparently, she had been delivering the outfit to Glenn.

Mr. Louis is pretty diligent, she thought. He'd just bought her a set of clothing for going out, not to mention a coat. While Louis was arrogant and rude, the type to force Monica to take on an undercover mission and send his pupil in as a decoy without telling him anything, he could be oddly conscientious about certain things.

Just then, Glenn said, "Oh," and looked behind her. Monica followed his gaze.

Glenn had spotted Cyril, dressed in navy-blue formal wear, quickly walking through the ballroom and looking every which way. His expression betrayed a sense of urgency. Had some kind of trouble come up?

Before Monica could say anything, Glenn waved his hand high in the air and called out to him. "Heya, Vice President! Something bothering you?"

"Hrm? Oh, hello, Glenn Dudley, Accountant Norton." Cyril walked over to them and threw another glance around the room. Finally, he lowered his perpetually raised eyebrows a little in an expression of distress. "Have you seen

the band's conductor anywhere?"

According to him, the conductor had gone to wash his hands and gotten lost. Without him, the performance couldn't start.

Monica looked around, then asked, "Do you know what the person looks like, Lord Cyril?"

"He's about as tall as me, a little plump, and he's over fifty. He has white hair curled at the ends, and he's wearing a black suit."

"Um, if I knew the length of his legs or arms or the precise size of his facial features, it would increase my precision..."

"How should I know?!" Cyril paused. "Wait. Precision? What on earth do you mean by *precision*?"

Monica didn't answer. Instead, she secretly used a farsight spell without chanting. Now she could see all around, even at a distance...but as short as she was, people kept getting in the way. Groaning a little, she stood on her tiptoes.

Glenn, with an understanding look, put his arms under Monica's and lifted her small body upward.

Cyril's eyes flew open. "What do you think you're doing?!" he yelled.

"This will help her see farther. Monica, do you see the conductor anywhere?"

She was a little—no, *very* embarrassed at Glenn picking her up, but it did help.

Monica could accurately measure a person's height or the length of their limbs just by looking at them. Even from far away, she only had to calculate distance and angles to reach a pretty good estimate.

From up in Glenn's arms, Monica fixed her gaze on a certain point and began to speak.

"Three men meet the criteria. One has his hair tied in the back, another has a hooked nose, and the third is standing with his wife. The second one's arms are of slightly different lengths, so I would guess he has played some kind of instrument for a long time."

"Does the hooked-nose man have a pin on his lapel? All the band members

have one.”

It was too far for a normal person to see, but with her farsight spell, Monica had a good view of the man’s collar. She adjusted the spell to focus in on it and made out a pin there in the shape of a violin.

“He’s wearing a violin pin,” she said.

“That’s our man,” replied Cyril. “Sorry, but could you bring me to him?”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Thanking Glenn for picking her up, Monica headed off with Cyril toward the conductor.

The man was pretty far away. Cyril squinted in the direction she’d indicated, then said dubiously, “I’m surprised you could see him from this distance.”

She couldn’t exactly tell him she’d used magecraft, so she just smiled vaguely and said, “Uh, I have, um, really good vision.”

That wasn’t a *complete* lie. For someone who spent a lot of time writing in dimly lit spaces, she did have pretty good eyesight. Not good enough to see from one end of the hall to the other, but still.

They found the conductor immediately. Cyril called out to him, and they pointed him toward the band and sent him on his way.

As the musical performance finally began, Cyril sighed in relief. “My thanks,” he said to her. “You really helped me out there. The band is bigger this year, which also means more unforeseen issues.”

“Um, I thought Lord Maywood was responsible for the band.”

In general, Neil was in charge of behind-the-scenes work at the ball. Come to think of it, Cyril had been helping him out during the preparations, too. Had something come up that Monica didn’t know about?

“Um, did something happen to Lord Maywood?” she asked. “Maybe I should help, too—”

“No, it’s nothing like that.” Cyril shook his head, his gaze drifting away a little awkwardly. “I wanted to find a way to give Officer Maywood some free time, so

I offered to trade places.”

“...?”

Why would Cyril do something like that?

But a moment later, something dawned on her. She’d had a lot of free time that day at the festival. One reason was that as accountant, she had little to do at the actual event. That said, the others could easily have assigned her more work as a member of the student council.

Before the festival had gotten started, Felix had told her something: “This is your first student festival. I hope you have a lot of fun.”

Cyril was probably showing the same consideration for Neil that Felix was for her. That way, Neil, who would otherwise have been incredibly busy, could enjoy the ball, too, if only a little.

Privately ashamed that she hadn’t figured this out earlier, Monica watched as one of the students on reception duty walked briskly up to Cyril and whispered something in his ear.

The vice president’s eyebrow twitched. “I see. I’ll be right there,” he replied.

Then, looking between Monica’s face and the floral decoration at her chest with a frown, he said, “Could I ask you to do something for me, Accountant Norton?”

“Y-yes, sir! What is it?!”

“There’s been some trouble at reception. I’d like to head over right now, but we don’t have enough people on kitchen liaison duty. Could you help coordinate until a replacement arrives?”

Kitchen liaison duty entailed maintaining communication between the ballroom and the kitchen. Usually, the waitstaff and cooks communicated directly, but when neither of them could handle a situation, a go-between was necessary to transport items and resolve issues.

Cyril had never assigned this kind of job to Monica before. She had poor interpersonal skills, so he always gave her behind-the-scenes tasks involving numbers.

That must be why he was so anxious. Naturally, so was she. Before, she might have shaken her head and cried that she couldn't do it.

But today I have this charm, so...!

She looked at the white rose affixed to her dress—the charm Cyril had given her so she wouldn't embarrass herself. After burning its image into her mind, she looked up. "I'll...I'll do it!"

Cyril frowned at her again. He was probably conflicted, too. Everyone knew how socially anxious she was. He was doubtless worried about giving her such a task.

"...If nothing happens, you can simply wait there until you're needed. If you have any trouble, call me."

"Y-yes, sir!" she said with more force than usual.

The effort made her dizzy for a moment. The poison was all gone, but she still wasn't back to full health. The exhaustion of running around school all day had piled up, too.

But Cyril was probably just as tired. So Monica straightened up in her corset and headed for the grand hall's attached kitchen.

* * *

In a corner in the ballroom, Felix was quietly conversing with his grandfather, Duke Clockford.

"The lords thought quite highly of the play," remarked the duke with his usual gravitas.

Felix took this compliment with a smile. "I'm happy to hear it. I hope you enjoyed it as well, Grandfather."

"I hear the main role was played by the Barrier Mage's pupil."

"Yes, that would be Glenn Dudley, a second-year student in the advanced course. He's an extremely talented young man."

"Reward him as you see fit."

This was an order to win the boy over, since his master openly supported the

first prince. Felix maintained his gentle smile and narrowed his eyes. “I will, Grandfather.”

This was the most influential noble in the kingdom and his grandson, a prince. Perhaps inevitably, all eyes were on them. But as everyone stood around, vainly wishing to speak to them, one girl gallantly strode up and curtsied politely—Eliane Hyatt, the daughter of Duke Rehnberg.

“Good evening, Your Grace.”

“Lady Eliane,” responded the duke. “Your performance in the play was every bit as beautiful as one would expect of the first queen Amelia.”

Her face lit up. “Oh, I’m honored, Your Grace! May I ask if you’ve spoken to my father yet?”

“We shared a few words earlier.”

“We would very much like to invite you to our lands during the winter break. Along with His Highness.”

“I will consider it.”

Duke Clockford had just praised Eliane’s acting as befitting of Queen Amelia. One might infer that also meant she was fitting to be queen for real.

Perhaps understanding that, the girl’s face flushed with delight.

Eventually, as the band’s performance got underway, the duke looked at Felix and Eliane. “The dance has begun. Go on and join.”

Eliane, holding back the pride and victory she clearly felt, looked up at Felix with a perfectly modest, ladylike expression. “Prince Felix...may I have this dance?”

“Of course.” The prince smiled sweetly and handsomely, gesturing for her to follow him onto the dance floor.

When they began, everyone’s focus immediately shifted to them. Those around them were enamored with the sight of such an attractive prince and a duke’s daughter dancing together.

And as they showed off their skill, in the brief moment when they changed

direction, each of them scanned their surroundings.

Eliane looked for Glenn. He was over at the refreshments table, stuffing his face with meat. As expected, he wasn't paying any attention to the dance floor.

Felix looked for Monica. She was discussing something with Cyril. As expected, she wasn't paying any attention to the dance floor.

My, my, my... More interested in food than me? thought Eliane. Just what sort of brain is stuffed into that head of yours, I wonder. Look at me, Glenn Dudley, and curse your fate. Watch the prince and me dance, and bite your nails in envy instead of biting into those sausages!

Monica has no idea what that floral decoration is for..., thought Felix. Don't you think it's a little unfair to call it a good-luck charm instead of telling her the truth, Cyril? Taking advantage of her ignorance to ask her for a dance...

Can't you see I'm right here, dancing with Prince Felix? At least spare me a glance. Have some sort of interest in me!

I doubt she cares much who I dance with. Though I suppose I knew that already. But we did spend a night together and all, so I feel like she could afford to pay a little more attention.

Then Felix and Eliane met each other's gazes once again, each of them offering a perfect, flawless smile.

"Dancing with you is like a dream, Prince."

"I'm honored to hear that."

They continued their dance, each pouring their focus in a different direction.

* * *

Claudia sat on the sofa, emanating a decidedly dreary aura. The utter gloom surrounding her was such that one might guess a terrible accident had befallen some dear relative of hers that very day.

No matter how dark her expression, though, it did nothing to blemish her overall beauty. To the men with feelings for her, even this palpable depression came off as a somber sort of transience.

"Lady Claudia, would you do me the honor of accepting this rose?"

The man down on his knee in front of Claudia offering her a floral decoration was the ninth challenger today. Hidden behind her folding fan, she exhaled. “Almost in the double digits...”

“Did you say something, my lady?”

She was referring to the number of flowers she’d thrown in the trash bin.

Claudia slowly sat up from the armrest she’d been leaning against and stared at the red rose being proffered. “I do like flowers,” she said.

“I chose a rose beautiful enough to suit you. It’s a new species my family has cultivated. It has a strong scent...”

“Yes, it does smell nice...”

A thin smile surfaced on Claudia’s doll-like face. That alone made her so beautiful that everyone around her caught their breaths, charmed.

The mystical black-haired beauty maintained her alluring smile and spoke to the man who had offered her the flower.

“...Its scent is too strong. I’d rather not wear it.”

The man’s face went still as stone. Muffled chuckles broke out among those privy to the exchange.

This would have broken most people’s hearts, but this ninth challenger was more persistent than the rest. “My family has a strong relationship with House Ashley—”

“Three generations ago, yes.”

“I’ve always wanted to talk with you, Lady Claudia.”

“If you’re after a connection to House Ashley, it would be quicker to suck up to my brother instead.”

“No, Lady Claudia, *you’re* the one I’m interested in. I’ve never seen a woman as beautiful as you.”

Claudia narrowed her lapis lazuli eyes and hid her mouth behind her fan. “Oh, how *wonderful* to have so little experience... You can offer such lines to every new woman you meet.”

Though the grand hall was buzzing with lively activity, a chill could be felt around Claudia's sofa. The man fell silent.

Then someone else spoke up from behind him, a little reserved. "Um, excuse me..."

Behind the first young man stood a slightly awkward, short boy in formal attire. It was Neil Clay Maywood, the student council's officer of general affairs.

Claudia looked at him impassively. "You're my fiancé. Why are you waiting in line?"

"Huh?! We may be engaged, but I can't cut in line!"

So earnest.

The man who until now had been trying to court her knew that Neil was her fiancé. He put on a flimsy, insincere smile and quickly withdrew.

Without sparing him a glance, Claudia looked up at Neil. As a member of the student council, he was always busy during events like these. He probably still had work left. It was unusual for him to even speak to her while on the job.

"Did something happen?" she asked.

Neil cleared his throat awkwardly, then brought his right hand from behind his back and held it out to her. In his palm was a floral decoration made of an orange rose tied with a brown ribbon.

As Claudia's eyes slowly widened, he smiled bashfully. "May I have this dance?"

It took several seconds for her to process what he was saying. She certainly wasn't trying to make fun of him—her words really did catch in her throat. It took a moment for her to speak.

"I believe such ornaments are meant as promises to dance later, not for giving to someone right before you dance with them."

But instead of saying how happy she would be to accept his offer, what came first was a rather mean-spirited remark.

Neil didn't seem offended, though. In fact, he looked apologetic. "Ah, I-I'm so

sorry. I wasn't sure if I'd have the time to dance today, so I thought it would be rude to make a promise like that, and..."

His response was exactly as Cyril had predicted.

Claudia narrowed her wide eyes, softening them into a smile. "Will you put it on for me?"

"Of course!"

Neil bent down in front of her—she was still sitting on the sofa—and reached for the upper part of her dress. He was very careful not to touch her as he affixed the decoration. Always so earnest.

Once he was done, he gave a slightly pained grin. "I suppose a different color of rose would have matched your blue dress better. So sorry...for, well, picking a color I liked."

"...I love it."

And she loved him—for being so considerate about matching Claudia instead of trying to dye her in his own colors.

I wish you would do more of the latter, she thought. She wanted him to be attached to her, to think of her as his own, and to make that fact known to the world.

Claudia extended a hand, and Neil took it with a natural motion. Side by side, she was significantly taller than him. She'd purposely chosen shoes with low heels, but the height difference was obvious regardless.

"I wondered if you wanted to avoid dancing with a taller girl," she commented.

"Huh?! I-I'm sorry. It must be difficult to dance with me, since I'm so short. Um, if you're really having trouble, just tell me, okay?"

And indeed, even now, he was filled with consideration for her. How annoying—and how charming—her beloved was.

"I could dance until morning, you know," she said.

"Oh, um, I'm sorry. I won't be able to do that," Neil answered immediately.

She shot him an ever-so-slightly sour glare, eliciting a troubled look from her partner.

“Vice President Ashley is taking over for me at the moment,” he explained. “Even though he’s busy himself. He’s been helping me since this morning...” Suddenly, he covered his mouth with a hand and looked up at her uncomfortably. “He told me to keep that a secret from you, though... Please don’t tell him I told you...”

“.....”

Claudia looked around, but Cyril wasn’t in the ballroom. He was probably scrambling around behind the scenes, all for Neil’s sake—putting himself second.

How very like him. So obstinate and yet so oddly considerate... How distasteful, she thought. Now she would have to find some way to repay this debt.

If she could, she wanted to repay it in such a way that her older brother would thank her with the most unhappy look imaginable.



CHAPTER 11

More than Equations or Magic Formulae...

Entrusted with the role of kitchen liaison, Monica left the ballroom and headed for the grand hall's attached kitchen. Because it was used only during large-scale events like these, it wasn't as well furnished or stocked as the school's main kitchen, and some of the food was cooked there and brought over.

When Monica peered through the open kitchen door, she could see cooks rushing around busily. It was even more exciting here than in the ballroom.

Sh-should I do the proper thing and say hello? If I go right in dressed like this, they'll wonder what I'm here for. I should introduce myself... But everyone looks so busy...

Interrupting someone hard at work was an extremely tall order for someone as shy as Monica. But as she fretted, a burly cook spotted her and called out. "What do you need, miss? Lost your way?"

"N-n-n-n-n-no," she said weakly. "Um, I, uh, I'm with the student council, um, and they told me to serve as liaison..."

The chef's face lit up. "Perfect timing! Good weather today, right?"

"Y-yes..."

"Well, one of our younger cooks left all the ice meant to chill the frozen desserts outside. And since it was so sunny today, it all melted. Could you get the vice president to make some new ice for us?"

Cyril had told her to simply stand by and wait if they didn't need anything, but apparently her job wouldn't be quite so easy. The cook handed her a large tub; it was big enough for a good-size adult to just barely wrap their arms around.

"We need enough ice to fill this container. Thanks!"

He'd already thanked her—there was no way out of it now. Monica reached her arms as far as they would go around the tub and waddled to one corner of

the hallway.

If they're okay with using ice made from magecraft, then it's not meant for consumption, just for chilling food. Since ice produced with magecraft contained mana, it wasn't fit to eat. People naturally lacked resistance to mana, and ingesting too much of it would result in mana poisoning. But if the cooks were only packing the ice around containers of frozen dessert to chill them, then that sort of ice was fine to use.

The cook had planned to ask Cyril to do it, since ice magecraft was his specialty, but the vice president was a busy man. Monica didn't want to add to his workload if she could help it.

Blowing a puff of air through her nose, she brought the tub to the back of the hallway, away from everyone else, and used unchanted magecraft to create ice. *They'll probably want clear ice with most of the impurities gone, right?* And with her skills, it didn't even take ten seconds to fill the whole tub.

"I did it..."

Sighing in satisfaction, Monica put her hands back on the tub and heaved.

"Urrrgh, phew, uuurrrgh..."

A bit late, she realized that the tub was too heavy for her to lift. It was such a silly mistake that she began to wonder how she ever became a Sage.

She struggled valiantly but, in the end, gave up on lifting it. Instead, she bent over and pushed on it with both hands. While she could have lifted it using wind magecraft, if anyone saw, they'd know she was a mage. So instead, she pushed on it alone, in silence.

I don't want to...bother anyone else with something like this...

Felix and Cyril had taken some of the work off Monica's plate so that she could have a good time at her first school festival. They were being so considerate of her. She couldn't bother such kind people with her silly blunder. She didn't want to inconvenience them and cause them to dislike her. She didn't want to disappoint them. She'd taken on this task of her own volition. *I have to do it right*, she told herself.

Especially since not too long ago, she'd let a couple of assassins escape due to a lapse in judgment. Now she was even more afraid of failing or causing trouble for others.

"Hoo... Hoo... Urrrgh..."

Thankfully, it wasn't very far to the kitchen. If she really tried, she'd get there.

Her breathing growing ragged, she kept pushing the tub until eventually she felt a sudden pain in her head. A powerful bout of dizziness washed over her, causing her vision to lurch.

...Oh, wait.

She'd spent the day running around, fighting, and breathing poison. She was exhausted, and her body hadn't recovered enough to do something so taxing.

And the headache didn't go away—in fact, it only got worse. All of a sudden, her vision went white, and the next moment, everything was pitch-black.

No... No, I can't... I haven't...

Her fingers slid from the tub. Her small body fell limp, crumpling to the floor. She felt herself going pale and her consciousness fading.

I still haven't...done anything for them...

* * *

After resolving the disagreement at the reception desk, Cyril hurried to the kitchen. From a cursory glance, it didn't seem like any other issues had cropped up. But the bigger an event was, the more tiny problems lurked just out of sight. If he ignored them, they would only grow until they became major issues. That's why it was his responsibility as Felix's right hand to continue settling them before that could happen—that way, he wouldn't have to bother the prince.

I managed to scrounge up the time for Officer Maywood to dance with Claudia...but once the band's performance is finished, things will get busier again.

As he mulled over what else needed to be done, he turned a corner and saw a ring of people standing just outside the kitchen door. They were surrounding

someone. He glimpsed a green skirt and felt his blood run cold.

“What’s going on?!” he demanded, running up and quickly confirming his hunch. Monica was lying on the floor, supported by a member of the kitchen staff.

A cook looked at her with concern and said, “Vice President, this girl collapsed in the hallway, and...”

Cyril got down on his knees, removed one of Monica’s gloves, and checked her pulse. It was present but weak. And the tips of her fingers were freezing.

I couldn’t tell how pale she was because of her makeup..., he thought. Exhaustion, tension—and anemia, perhaps. Whatever the case, he couldn’t simply leave her lying here. The second floor of the grand hall included several small rooms meant for taking breaks. They’d have plenty of blankets up there.

“I’ll take her to a resting room. Everyone else, please return to your posts.”

He issued instructions to the kitchen staff as he scooped Monica up. He wasn’t too confident in his strength, but he could probably get her to a second-floor room by himself.

As he rose with the girl in his arms, he spotted a bucket on the floor. It was full of exceptionally pure, clear ice. It must have been created with magecraft.

“...What’s that?” he asked.

A burly cook picked up the tub and said, “The ice we were using in the kitchen melted, so we asked her to fetch some more. You made it with your magecraft, right? It’s a huge help. With this much, chilling those desserts will be no problem.”

Cyril hadn’t made the ice. But in that case, where did Monica get it? *Did she bring it over from the kitchen in the school building? It doesn’t look nearly melted enough to have been carried all that way...*

He looked down at the sleeping Monica. Her arms had bent as he’d picked her up; they now rested limp on her stomach. Her right arm—from which he’d removed the glove when measuring her pulse—was skinny as a twig. Her hand was far smaller than Cyril’s, and she had a callous on her middle finger. It was

the hand of someone who held a pen for several hours each day.

Cyril stared at her hand for a few more moments, then made his way up to the second floor.

* * *

From far away, she could make out the soft sounds of music.

The song I heard in dance class... The ternary system of waltzes...

“It’s called three-part time.”

Casey had said that, hadn’t she? With an awkward grin on her face.

As she recalled the days spent practicing dancing with her friends, Monica slowly opened her eyes. Two blue irises appeared in her still-hazy vision. They were peering at her with worry.

“...Lord...Cyril?” she murmured, almost getting her tongue in a twist. Cyril sighed in relief.

Monica slowly sat up and got a grasp on her current situation. She was wrapped in a blanket and lying on a sofa. A short distance away, Cyril was watching her.

“Are you cold?”

That brief question was all it took for Monica to realize why he was so far away from her. His mana hyperabsorption caused him to constantly emit cold air. He must be worried that being next to her would make her cold.

“Um, Lord Cyril, I, ummm...”

She looked around the room, recognizing it. This was one of the resting rooms on the grand hall’s second floor. Why had she been brought here?

I was trying to carry the ice...

“You were on the floor in front of the kitchen. Do you not remember?”

“...!”

Monica’s mouth flapped opened and closed. Then she buried her pallid face in her hands. She’d thought she was fine—she could still move. But apparently, she’d been more exhausted than she thought. She’d overestimated her own

abilities and caused trouble for someone else.

“I’m, I’m sorry... Sorry for bothering you with...with...”

She’d intended to carry out the job he’d entrusted her with on her own. And this was the result. The cause of her failure was clear—pushing herself too hard and not asking for help because she didn’t want to inconvenience anyone and make them dislike her.

Monica was shy and always hesitant to seek assistance. Rather than getting sour looks from whoever she asked, she’d much prefer to manage things on her own.

She’d tried to do just that—and failed. *I didn’t help at all. In fact, I caused more problems...* Tears fell from her eyes, wetting the petals of the white rose at her breast.

“I’m... I’m sorry...” She looked down, stifling her sobs, and heard a sigh from Cyril. She shook. He was probably fed up with her now.

“Were you not feeling well?” he asked.

Monica just hung her head, sniffing, not answering.

“The cooks were thankful for the ice,” he mentioned.

She looked up at him in surprise. He wasn’t angry—he seemed more troubled than anything else.

“I knew you weren’t a good fit for liaison duty where you might have to negotiate. But you decided to help anyway, and I think highly of that.”

“...Mmgh... Huh?”

“You hadn’t taken proper care of yourself this time, and it didn’t turn out as well as I’d hoped, but you did fulfill the task’s minimum requirements.”

As Monica’s tear-soaked lashes moved up and down, Cyril’s eyebrows rose in a familiar expression.

“Of course, if this continues, it will be a problem. I’ll make you into a negotiator yet! The next time you’re feeling ill, report it to me at once! And if you need extra help, ask those around you!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

“The prince wants Officer Maywood to be the student council president next year. And he will likely appoint you to join him, since you have experience.”

Monica and Neil were the only two second-year students on the council. Everyone else was in their third year. If Felix and the others graduated and Neil became president, it seemed natural to assume he’d ask Monica to stay on as a member.

“Once Officer Maywood is president, you’ll be his right hand. By then, you’ll need to know your stuff when it comes to communication. Remember that and continue to devote yourself.”

Cyril spoke as though it was obvious Monica would be at the academy next year.

But there wouldn’t be a next year—not for Monica Norton.

She was here to protect Felix. Once the prince graduated, she’d have no reason to stay. His graduation would mean Monica leaving school and going back to her life as Monica Everett, the Silent Witch and one of the Seven Sages.

That’s why I was so desperate to help out at this year’s ball...

When he saw Monica looking depressed, Cyril cleared his throat awkwardly. “Also, leaving aside your job as a student council member... Well.”

“...?”

She looked up at Cyril as he hesitated over his words.

He glanced at her floral decoration. “You were looking forward to the dance, right? ...Sorry for making you help out with all this.”

“Huh?” Monica stared at him blankly. She hadn’t expected that. Had she mentioned looking forward to the dance?

Oh, right. This morning in the student council room... Finally, she remembered. Early that morning, Bridget had spotted her sneaking out of the girls’ dorm, and she’d said in front of everyone she had been secretly practicing her dancing.

Wait, has that been on Lord Cyril's mind this whole time...?! Her face went pale with guilt. She hadn't wanted to dance at the ball in the first place. She'd just wanted to make herself useful as Monica Norton, student council accountant—though she'd failed in the end.

"Um, actually, I think I'll sit this one out," she said, smiling clumsily. "...I'm, well, not very good, so I'd just embarrass whoever I was with..."

Cyril looked a little put off by that. *Why?* wondered Monica.

He walked over to her sofa. Then he got down on his knee in front of her and extended a hand. "Nobody will be watching us here, so there's no need for embarrassment."

His pretty blue eyes reflected Monica's stunned expression.

"May I have this dance, my lady?"

Pierced by his gaze, she placed her hand in his.

Cyril guided her along in time with the band's performance, which they could hear from somewhere in the distance. She hadn't danced with him since the time they practiced for her class. As ever, Cyril was a good lead, naturally guiding the clumsy Monica.

She twirled, sending her lace-adorned skirt fluttering into the air. Cyril gently supported her as she staggered on her way back, and they resumed the proper steps.

Monica wasn't great when it came to moving around. But right now, she was genuinely enjoying it.

Eventually, before the song ended, Cyril stopped and brought their dance to an end. Monica figured he was still concerned about her condition, but instead, he narrowed his eyes and frowned.

"Why are you worse at this than before?" he murmured aloud, his voice low. His dubious stare was a far cry from proper dancing etiquette—but it was classic Cyril Ashley.

Feeling weirdly relieved by his familiar attitude, Monica started muttering and making excuses. "I-I'm sorry. If I had cleared my mind and focused on numerical

equations, I could have done a little better. But...”

That was how she’d passed the retest in ballroom dancing class. For her, it was much easier to dance if she thought of nothing but equations, letting the other person lead. But she hadn’t done that this time.

“It just seemed...kind of a waste to fill my head with numbers, so...”

The world of numbers was the most beautiful thing Monica could imagine. She didn’t know of anything that absorbed or obsessed her more than equations and magic formulae.

But just for this moment, more than either of those things, she wanted to make sure she never, ever forgot this time spent as Monica Norton.

As her brows lowered awkwardly, Cyril’s gaze wandered. Eventually, he said gruffly, “Make sure you can dance a little better by next year’s ball.”

Monica carefully hid the emotions threatening to make her cry and offered him a vague smile.

I’m sorry, Lord Cyril. Next year, I...I won’t be here.

That was why, more than equations, more than magic formulae, Monica wanted *memories*.

Memories that glittered like all the treasures in her drawer.





EPILOGUE

The Happiness of the Hero Who Became a Star

After sitting Monica back down on the sofa, Cyril took the blanket that had fallen to the side, spread it out, and tucked it over her shoulders.

“I need to get back now. Rest here until you feel better.”

“Yes, sir. Um... Well, I’m, um, sorry about everything.”

She’d meant to help him, but he’d come to her rescue instead. And when she thought about how much consideration Cyril had shown her, she couldn’t help the guilt swelling in her chest.

But Cyril just folded his arms like always and gave an arrogant sniff. “As the prince’s right hand, this is nothing. And Officer Maywood should return soon as well.”

At first, she’d been intimidated by his haughty behavior. Lately, though, she found it oddly comforting. She fingered the ribbon hanging from her rose ornament and looked up at him. “Lord Cyril, thank you...um, for the good-luck charm. I did a lot better than usual today.”

The vice president’s eyes softened ever so slightly, and a subtle smile played at the corners of his lips.

“...Is that so?” he said, seeming to reflect on her words before finally leaving the room.

As she listened to the door quietly close, Monica pulled the blanket more tightly over her shoulders. The dizziness had mostly passed, but she’d fainted not long ago. It was probably best if she rested a little longer.

Her eyes wandered to the window, and she breathed a sigh of admiration at the sight of the stars glittering in the night sky. She wondered if the Starseer Witch was looking up at them, too, watching over the kingdom’s future.

Come to think of it, I wonder what she meant by all those things she said before.

When Monica last visited the woman's mansion, its owner had been somber. "I pay particular attention to what the stars say about the future of the kingdom and the royal family..." she'd said. "But for around ten years now, I have found Prince Felix's fate alone unreadable."

Major incidents had been happening around Felix for a while. Casey's attempted assassination and the intruder at the chess competition, to name a few. And that same intruder—Ewan—had come again that very day with another assassin named Heidi. Each of these, even taken alone, was no small matter, and yet the Starseer Witch hadn't been able to predict any of them.

I'm curious about that Ewan man... He wasn't trying to kill the prince. But then why did he sneak into the academy?

Ewan had said something strange. "I wasn't able to make direct contact, but I got a good look up close, and I saw the traces. It's the work of the traitor Artur. The prediction we were given was correct after all."

What had he needed to confirm by getting so close to Felix? Who was this traitor named Artur? And who had given them that prediction? The more she thought about it, the more questions she had.

Monica went up to the window and stared idly at the twinkling stars. Was Felix's fate somewhere among them?

"...Huh?"

While she couldn't see the prince's fate in the night sky, she happened to see the boy himself right underneath it, next to a tree. For a moment, she doubted her eyes, hastily casting a farsight spell. It was indeed him—the boy with a body that adhered to the golden ratio.

"Wh-what's the prince doing out there?!" she exclaimed in astonishment as she watched him.

But just as she began to speculate on why he had snuck out of the ball, the prince took a look around and—still in his formal attire—began to climb the tree.

"What?!" she cried again. Felix was the star of the ball. What in the world was he doing all alone outside?

Whatever the case, Monica had been tasked with guarding him. She couldn't ignore this. She hurried out of the room and headed for the prince.

* * *

Monica remembered the shape of the tree Felix had climbed, and she spotted it right away once she was outside. If she peeled her eyes, she could see his gorgeous blond hair between the leaves.

"Pri-Pri-Pr-Prince...!" she called up the tree.

The leaves rustled. "You sure are good at finding me at times like this," he called down. Then he chuckled before nimbly leaping out of the tree and landing in front of her.

Monica panicked, worried he might hurt himself jumping from such a height. But he seemed fine as he casually plucked a leaf out of his hair.

"Pri-Prince, um, what about the ball?" she stammered.

"My grandfather left, so I figured I'd get a little fresh air."

"Did you need to climb a tree?" she asked hesitantly.

Felix flashed her a mischievous grin. That was Ike's smile—the one she'd seen that night in Corlapton. "I thought I'd take a look at the stars. They seem especially bright tonight."

"Do you, um...like stars?"

"Not especially," he replied easily, looking up at them and squinting. "I'm not into them much myself, but I had a friend who was. He used to talk to me about them a lot, so I know a thing or two, and I always get the urge to come out and have a look when the night is clear."

With the most natural of motions, Felix took her hand, then placed his other on her waist—like they were about to start dancing.

"Um, Prince, we should go back inside..."

"Keep me company out here for just a few minutes, won't you? I know you'd never agree to dance with me in the ballroom."

He was completely right, so Monica decided to keep her mouth shut and let

him lead. It ended up being less of a dance and more of them walking in time to the music. Monica's steps were all over the place, but that only seemed to amuse him more.

"This reminds me of when I taught you how to dance. You were thinking about something else at the time, though. The reflectivity of gemstones, was it?"

"Urk..."

"What about me? Won't you think about me instead?"

Right now, Felix was all she could think about. Mainly how best to protect him and why the Starseer Witch couldn't see his fate. She wasn't dull enough to come out and say that, though, and just mumbled something inaudibly.

Felix shot her a teasing grin and brought his lips up to her ear. "That dress really suits you. It's pretty, but not gaudy, and it brings out your charms. Green is really your color. Mm. A dark, forest green would be nice, but I like this one, too. It's like new spring foliage."

"Th-thank you..." Receiving compliments on her dress was a little embarrassing, but since Lana had prepared it for her, it was like he was complimenting Lana. That made her happy.

"Your hair is cute, too," he continued. "That flower braid—did your friend do it for you?"

"Yes! Lana and I match!" she said with a bit of pride in her voice.

Felix's lips turned up into a little half smile. It was a kind expression, but it seemed somehow clouded. Was it because of the dark?

"Makes me a little jealous," he said.

"...Huh?"

The hand holding her waist tightened. They stopped, though the music played on. Felix's blue eyes looked almost mechanically at the floral decoration on Monica's chest. And then, with his other hand, he reached out to touch her neck. His gloved fingers stroked her skin.

"You didn't wear the peridot I gave you."

The tickle of his low voice in her ear made her jolt. All of a sudden, she remembered how much attention he'd been paying to her neck when they watched the play together.

His voice, a little pouty, was that of the boy she'd met in Corlapton.

"...Ike?"

"Mm-hmm."

"I'm... I'm still just a beginner at fashion, so..."

"I know, but I wanted to see you wearing the necklace."

It was like Felix was jealous of how Lana had done her hair and how Cyril had given her the floral decoration. Though none of that made any sense.

As she stood there in confusion, Felix gazed at her, a strange heat rising in his eyes. "Gemstones and stars have a similar sparkle, you know. If only you'd been wearing that necklace, even a meteor shower would be nothing. I would have been more taken with your beauty than the stars."

With Felix staring her right in the face, his sculpted features a mere hairbreadth away, Monica's thoughts sped up and her eyes began to spin. "Sh-sh-sh-shhh..."

"Hmm?"

"Shooting stars are smaller and lighter than the pebbles at our feet, but the reason they shine so beautifully is because they're moving at speeds so fast, they could travel from this kingdom to the next in a single second. Incidentally, the reason objects moving at high speeds shine is different from the reason gemstones shine, and anyway, unless a gemstone is imbued with mana, it doesn't shine at all and it's just refracting light..."

Felix put a hand to his mouth, and his shoulders trembled. She heard him stifle a few breaths before, at last, he burst into laughter. Ike's laughter.

"I wasn't aware you knew so much about stars. I thought you were only into numbers."

"...Ummm..."

Monica hadn't engaged in any serious study of astronomy, but she'd calculated the orbits of stars in the past at the Starseer Witch's request. As a result, she had a pretty good grasp on the fundamentals.

"At the root of biology are layers of tiny, tiny numbers. Astronomy, then, is made up of bunches of really large numbers, far larger than even the kingdom's budget... So, well, both of them are interesting to me, mathematically speaking."

"Do you want to be a scholar?"

Monica's words caught in her throat for a moment at the question. Then she smiled vaguely and said, "Maybe."

She'd never known what she wanted to be. Always afraid of other people, pulled along by life's current... Before she knew it, she'd become one of the Seven Sages. Ever since then, she'd holed up in her cabin in the mountains doing nothing but magecraft research. In that sense, she might already qualify as a research scientist where magecraft was concerned—possibly one of the finest in the kingdom.

As Monica fell silent, Felix's attitude grew more serious. "If there's a specific field you'd like to enter, I can have a word with Count Kerbeck."

"N-no, that's not... You don't need to..."

"Most of the girls who graduate from Serendia have a single career path: marriage. I don't know whether the count plans to marry you off, but... Is there anyone you'd *like* to marry?"

"No," answered Monica immediately.

That, at least, she could say for sure. She didn't understand romance or love. In fact, she was a helpless witch, terrified of other human beings. How could building a warm, comfortable family ever be in her future?

After she left the academy, she'd probably return to a life of solitude in her cabin, wrestling once again with equations and magic formulae.

But she'd always keep her memories of Serendia Academy close to her heart. They were treasures to her.

As she hung her head, eyes vacant, Felix took her hand again. She blinked and looked up at him, and he smiled back softly.

Is that the prince's smile? Or is it Ike's?

She still couldn't guess by the time he spoke again. "Then I'll tell you what a friend once told me. 'I want you to find something that excites you—for your own enjoyment and nobody else's. I want you to find all kinds of things that interest and entertain you.'"

Those were the words Ike had spoken the night of the Bell-Ringing Festival. That was the reason he was looking for something that excited him.

"I doubt I have much freedom left. So I'd like it if you carried on this wish for me."

A lonely smile played across his lips. That was Ike's smile.

"But what about...what about you, Ike?"

He was trying to give up on his friend's words—words he'd always held close to his heart. He wanted to entrust the wish they held to Monica.

The moment she realized this, Monica sensed, for the first time, a precariousness in the young man before her.

"Your friend wanted you to find something you really liked, didn't he?" she said, awkwardly constructing her thoughts. "Are you...just going to stop looking?"

Felix's voice was quiet. "There's a wish I want to see to fruition even if it means going against my friend's." He used his gloved fingers to point to a particular star in the eastern sky, glittering more brightly than the rest.



“Look—that big star connects two trapezoids to form the hero Ralph’s constellation. On his deathbed, the first king feared the people would forget about him. So his wife, Amelia, asked the King of the Dark Spirits, Eldiora, to make the deceased man into a constellation—all so that his people would remember him whenever they gazed at the night sky.”

Why was Felix suddenly talking about mythology? At first, Monica thought it was to deflect from her question. Her gut, though, told her that wasn’t the case. Monica was getting a glimpse into something fundamental to the young man before her.

His blue eyes seemed entranced as they gazed up at the hero’s star. “If one could leave their sparkle in the night sky even after death, just like Ralph... Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

Goose bumps broke out on the back of Monica’s neck.

Felix always wore a calm, gentle smile. Others might call him Duke Clockford’s puppet, but he was a model prince—like a well-mannered doll. Now, however, as he looked up at the stars, Monica could see the fires of attachment, of *obsession* in his eyes.

In his gaze, she felt a quiet conviction.

When the prince looked back at her, his face had regained its familiar, tranquil smile. “It’s getting cold out. Why don’t we head back inside?”

His sweet voice, his gentle smile—they were all to hide his true nature.

She knew he wouldn’t let her see any more of it, no matter how much she asked. Face pale, she nodded and followed after him.

From a distant balcony, someone was watching Felix and Monica as they hung around outside the grand hall.

That someone was Bridget Greyham, student council secretary.

The hand gripping her folding fan trembled, but not because of the cold. She was shaking because of the torrent of emotions rising within her.

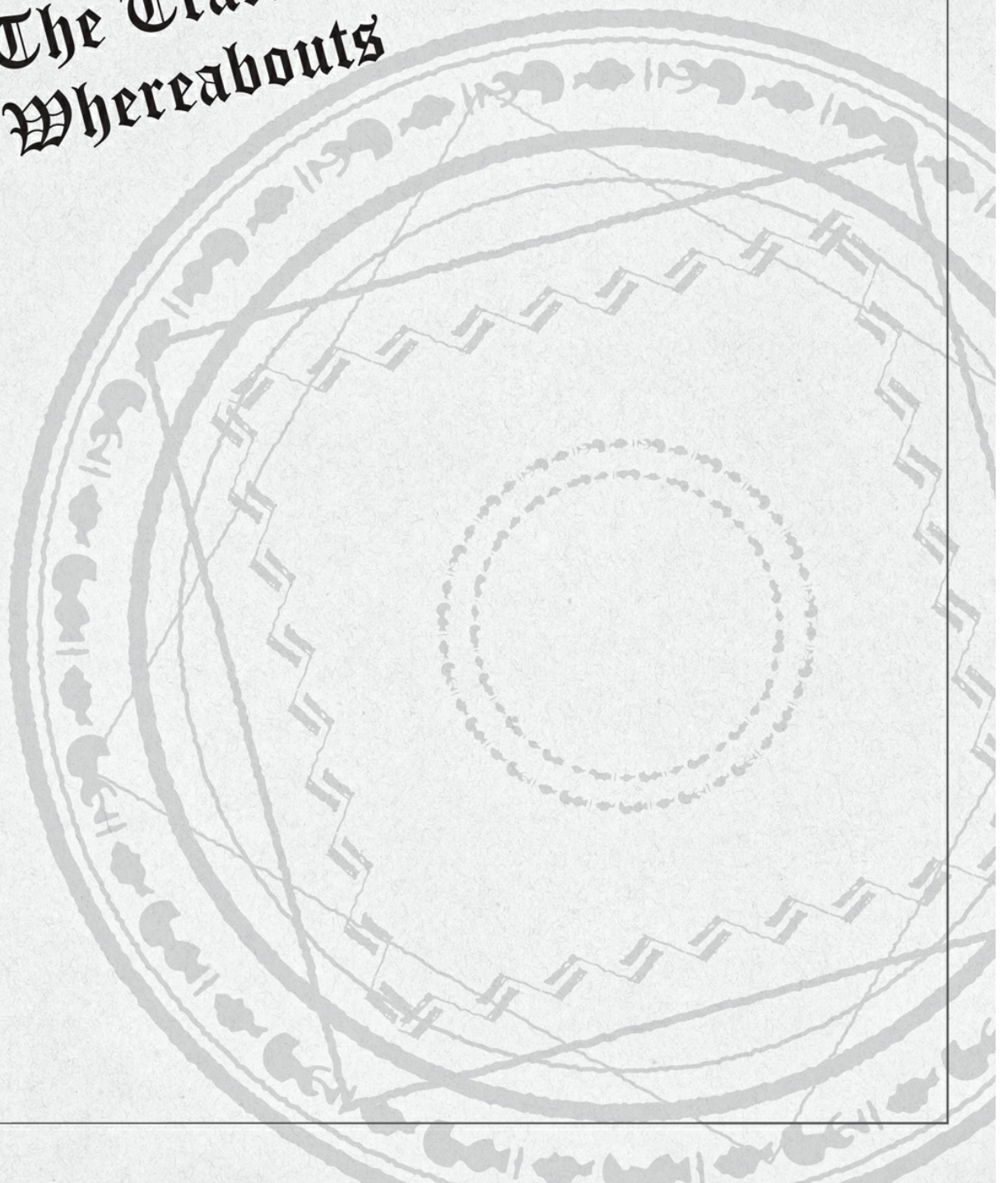
Those emotions lent a deep luster to her amber eyes, but the noble beauty held them in check as she muttered, voice low:

“...You *will* give my prince back to me.”



SECRET EPISODE

The Traitorous Shaman's Whereabouts



“...Ah, ah-choo!”

Under a star-filled sky, atop the roof of the grand hall where the ball was taking place, the Barrier Mage, Louis Miller, sneezed and shivered. The northern wind was blowing against his cheek, announcing winter’s imminent arrival. Privately, he reflected on how he should have brought warmer clothes if he was going to be sitting up on the roof like this for such a long time.

“Ugh, it’s so cold...”

Grumbling, Louis removed a small bottle of wine from his inside pocket and gulped it down. Nothing like strong alcohol to warm yourself up quickly.

It would be warmer in the ballroom, but only those with a direct invitation from Duke Clockford were allowed to attend. Naturally, a supporter of the first prince like Louis was not one of them. That was why he was up on the roof, keeping watch while doing his best to stay warm.

Though I doubt anyone would dare try to sneak into that ballroom...

The guests were all handpicked by the duke himself, and security was tight. He didn’t think there would be any problems, but it was best to make absolutely sure.

...Still...

Casting a farsight spell, Louis directed his gaze to a garden next to the grand hall. Standing there in conversation were the second prince—the very person he’d been ordered to protect—and the Silent Witch, Monica Everett.

I told her to rest. She must be very passionate about her work.

If he got close enough to hear what they were saying, the ever-vigilant second prince might notice him. Instead, he simply watched them from afar with his magecraft.

It’s wonderful that she won the prince’s trust, but...I have a feeling the girl is in a little too deep. He’d need to take that into account when working out future plans.

As he mulled this over and downed more liquor, Ryn—in her maid’s outfit—silently landed behind him. Her bird form was much less conspicuous, but it

probably didn't matter now that the sun had set. He didn't look at her, instead keeping his eyes on Monica and the prince. "Anything wrong inside the school?" he asked.

"Nothing," she replied. "And I have a message from the Abyss Shaman, who is patrolling outside the grounds."

Louis scowled, recalling the face of his depressing colleague. "Keep it simple for me."

"He complained about you, demanded to be loved, cursed the world for not loving him, outwardly envied mycelia, and reported that there are no suspicious persons near the school. That is all."

As expected, 90 percent of her report was worthless. It was good that nobody weird was hanging about, but then again, the gloomy shaman himself was probably the weirdest of them all.

Still, while he might be questioned, it was unlikely he would be taken into custody while wearing his Sage's robes. At least, Louis hoped not.

But what were the assassins after? If they wanted to kill the prince, there were far simpler ways of doing so. All they'd done was use disguises to get close to him. Louis had checked inside the school after that, but aside from the fake Spiralflame he'd retrieved, he found no other magic items.

"Ryn, you heard what the assassins and the Silent Witch said to each other, right? Did either of them let slip anything about the goal of this little infiltration mission?"

"Yes, they were quite slippery indeed," said Ryn, nodding once before continuing in a monotone. "The intruders made the following remarks: 'Ewan, were you able to confirm it?' 'I wasn't able to make direct contact, but I got a good look up close, and I saw the traces. It's the work of the traitor Artur. The prediction we were given was correct after all.' And that is it."

Artur was a common name in the Empire. It seemed safe to assume the assassins were under that government's influence. But why would someone from the Empire want to get near the second prince?

And who was this traitor, Artur?

...Wait.

A hypothesis formed in his mind. It was a bizarre, ridiculous idea. But if true, it would explain why the Starseer Witch could no longer read the second prince's fate.

Could His Majesty have known something? Is that why he sent me? To suss them out?

Unfortunately, this wasn't something he could carelessly bring up with the king. If things went badly, his head could fly for the crime of disrespecting the crown.

More importantly, if his hypothesis was correct, this was big enough to shake the kingdom to its core.

Louis couldn't help but smile. He put a hand to his mouth and chuckled.

"Lord Louis, your face is like that of a fiendish villain drawing up his evil designs."

"Evil? Don't paint me as the villain. It's just that when I imagine Duke Clockford's downfall, I'm so happy I can't stop smiling. That's all."

If his hypothesis was correct, then both the duke and the second prince would be brought low. Louis didn't have any positive feelings toward either of them, so he had no reason to be merciful.

But I should keep this a secret from the Silent Witch... Her emotions have become a liability.

He wasn't sure how she'd act in the face of the second prince's downfall. It would be safest to play things close to the vest until absolutely necessary.

Louis licked his dry lips and grinned evilly. "Bullying those in power feels so good."

* * *

The day after Serendia Academy's school festival, an especially fancy carriage made its way down a road in the eastern part of the kingdom. The carriage was not only large, but it utilized cutting-edge magic items to absorb the shaking.

Riding in that big, comfortable carriage was Duke Rehnberg, his wife, several

servants, and a man wearing traveling clothes. The traveler sat directly in front of the duke, wearing an insincere smile and talking as much as they would let him.

“Woo-hoo! I must apologize for all this, m’lord—a dingy man like me riding in your fancy carriage.”

The traveler’s name was Bartholomeus. He looked to be in his mid-twenties and had a bandanna tied around his short black hair.

Duke Rehnberg, offering only brief, simple replies, was a slender man in middle age. If one was being charitable, they might say he was “elegant,” but the truth was he seemed rather helpless.

In a voice so soft it was almost drowned out by the sound of the wheels, the duke said, “No, no, don’t worry. It’s thanks to you that this carriage is so comfortable in the first place, Bartholomeus.”

The carriage that Duke Rehnberg and his wife had used to attend Serendia Academy’s school festival the day before had broken down on their way home. Part of the magic item that absorbed the carriage’s shaking had been damaged, making the rattling worse than ever.

Carriages fitted with magic items were convenient, but the issue was that not many people could repair them. Especially not in the middle of the road.

Their party had been stuck, unable to do much of anything, when Bartholomeus happened to walk by. He’d told them he was a traveling engineer, then used only the tools he had on hand to repair the carriage. Apparently, he’d held a job at a workshop for magic items in the past.

That was why the duke was so grateful and why he’d invited him to their estate and brought him into the carriage.

“Once we’ve arrived, please allow me to thank you,” said the duke.

“That’d be just swell, m’lord. There *was* something I wanted to ask you about. As you can see, I’m an engineer, but I’ve been out of a job for a spell...” He trailed off, implying he wanted the man to help him find work.

The duke nodded generously. “In that case, why not come work for us?”

“Are you sure?!” cried Bartholomeus. “That would be wonderful! I’m good with my hands, but that’s honestly all I’ve got. If you have odd jobs that need doing, I’ll take on anything. I can paint walls, repair stables, even fix clothes—anything you need, m’lord, just say the word!”

Yet another man sat in the carriage headed for Duke Rehnberg’s domain, quietly stifling his panic. He was a shaman—and he’d once ingratiated himself with House Albright, stolen its techniques and tools, and fled.

I can’t believe the Albrights have caught wind of my location already...

The man was practically in a frenzy after the Abyss Shaman had spotted him leaving Serendia Academy’s school festival. If he was caught, he’d never see the light of day again. The current family head was still young, but the previous head, now an old woman, could commit any number of atrocities if she put her mind to it.

He would feel pain. Every variety of it. In accordance with House Albright’s teachings, he would not even be afforded death as an escape. He would be kept alive to suffer—in ways both brutal and humiliating.

He recalled the evil smirk of the Abyss Shaman’s predecessor and shivered. *That person... That noble personage will protect me from the Albrights. I just know it. But if my research doesn’t produce results, they’ll eventually abandon me. Like they abandoned Victor Thornlee and his mental interference magecraft.*

Victor Thornlee, formerly a teacher at Serendia Academy, had been thrown in prison for appropriation of school funding and the use of forbidden magecraft. He’d never have a second chance to blossom as a mage.

I have to finish this puppetry curse as soon as I can—before I’m cut off, too. I won’t let it end here, thought the man, clenching his fists in his lap. His hands were plenty dirty already. There was no going back now.

“You seem quite skilled, Bartholomeus,” said Duke Rehnberg. “You took no time at all to fix our carriage’s magic item.”

Bartholomeus opened his mouth wide and laughed. “Wah-ha!” He’d always been a loud man. He scratched his beard, then started up again with an air of solemnity. “I don’t deserve that much credit, m’lord. Magic items have a lot of

delicate calculations underpinning them, so if even one is missing, the whole thing falls apart. All I did was slip in a replacement for the missing piece.”

“Oh? Calculations, you say?”

“Yeah, magic items—well, magic formulae in general—it’s all just a world of numbers when you get right down to it. They’re just filled with ’em, you might say.”

The disguised shaman sucked in his breath at those casual words.

“The world is filled with numbers.”

That was what the man he most detested always said.

Ahhh, ahhh... Even in death, your words continue to torment me... Your existence is like a curse, Venedict.

Victor Thornlee had been imprisoned. Venedict Reyn had been burned at the stake. Both of them had met their doom.

I will not fail, he told himself. I cannot...

The shamanic arts were said to be a poison that sprung forth from the abyss in one’s heart. Despite feeling this poison slowly eating away at his mind, the man had clung to its techniques.

They were all he had left now.



Characters So Far

Characters



Monica Everett

The Silent Witch, one of the Seven Sages.

At first, she was reluctant to start her undercover life at Serendia, but now she wants to treasure every minute of her time as Monica Norton.



Louis Miller

The Barrier Mage, one of the Seven Sages.

Pretends to respect his master, the Mage of Violet Smoke, but in reality, he'd gladly punch him in the face if the opportunity presented itself. Not really an ideal pupil.



Nero

Monica's familiar. His biggest accomplishment during the school festival was resisting the temptation to take a bite out of the meat Glenn was grilling.

I really held out. I'm amazing, right? Beyond amazing.



Rynzbelfeid

A high wind spirit contracted to Louis. She listened carefully all throughout the school festival and now has a useless but extensive knowledge of romance and rumors at Serendia.



Mary Harvey

The Starseer Witch, one of the Seven Sages and the foremost prophet in the Kingdom of Ridill.

She stays awake at night and sleeps during the day in order to read the stars, so she always takes good care of her skin. Her hobby is watching beautiful young men.



Felix Arc Ridill

The second prince of the Kingdom of Ridill and student council president at Serendia Academy.

To leave his name in history like the hero who became a star—and for no other reason—he continues to play the perfect prince.



Ray Albright

The Abyss Shaman, one of the Seven Sages. Covertly watched the festival play from behind a tree and purchased everything any female student recommended to him at the bazaar. Secretly enjoyed the festival a lot.



Cyril Ashley

The foster son of Marquess Highown and vice president of the student council. Thankful to many people for making this year's festival his most memorable. That includes his hard-working junior, of course.

Characters



Elliott Howard

The son of Count Dasvy and a secretary on the student council. Has an older fiancée who came to the school festival, but he was so busy with student council affairs that he barely had time for her.



Neil Clay Maywood

The son of Baron Maywood and the student council's officer of general affairs. Part of the Lineage of the Mediators. Frequently called to mediate trouble between students. His skills are even recognized by his upperclassmen.



Bridget Greyham

The daughter of Marquess Shaleberry and a secretary on the student council.

Was given many floral decorations during the school festival. Some told her they just wanted her to have one even if she didn't dance with them, but she stubbornly refused them all.



Lana Colette

The daughter of Baron Colette. Exchanged several letters with her father discussing the dress she wanted to lend to Monica. Her father was very happy when he read the words, "I want to have my friend wear something wonderful."



Isabelle Norton

The daughter of Count Kerbeck and Monica's coconspirator on her mission.

She always remembers to write a letter home once per month, and it's filled with tidbits about her beloved "elder sister." Gets along well with her younger brother, Henry. All her family members are fans of the Silent Witch.



Claudia Ashley

The daughter of Marquess Highown, Cyril's foster sister, and Neil's fiancée. After a short conversation with her father during the festival, she spent the rest of the day until the ball reading alone in her dorm room.



Glenn Dudley

A second-year student in Serendia Academy's advanced course. The son of a butcher and Louis's pupil. Frequently visits Louis's family, so he knows his wife and Ryn as well.



Benjamin Mording

A third-year student in Serendia Academy's advanced course and the son of a court musician. A playboy who triple-booked ladies to become his patron during the school festival.

Characters



Eliane Hyatt

The daughter of Duke Rehnberg and Felix's second cousin. One of the three most beautiful girls at Serendia. A modest lady on the surface, but underneath her facade, she's an extremely prideful girl who hates to lose.

Has a bit of skill in magecraft but really only dabbles in it.



Bernie Jones

The son of Count Ambard and a former friend of Monica's from when she attended Minerva's Mage Training Institution. Plans to leave Minerva's in order to inherit his father's title.

Practiced smoothly calling out to Monica right up until the day of the festival.



William Macragan

A high mage who teaches fundamental magecraft at Serendia Academy.

Nicknamed the Waterbite Mage, he is second to none when it comes to offensive precision against underwater enemies. As a youth, he was the first to ever slay a water dragon.



Gideon Rutherford

A teacher at Minerva's Mage Training Institution and a high mage.

Nicknamed the Mage of Violet Smoke, he is Louis's master and Monica's former teacher. Can use a unique spell that imbues his pipe's smoke with mana.

Afterword



Thank you for purchasing *Secrets of the Silent Witch*, Volume 4. This book contains the full school festival arc. The web version of this part of the story was about 80,000 characters, and from the start, I'd planned for it to lead into the next episode.

When I was told at a meeting that I could make the school festival arc into a full volume, I was really excited to be able to write more for it! And write I did. So much, in fact, that I ran right up against the character limit.

...I guess history really does repeat itself.

With the school festival arc over, the fifth volume will be the winter break arc—but we actually decided to have another episode that takes place between the two containing a completely original story.

Its official title is *Secrets of the Silent Witch IV —After— The Silent Witch's Case File*. It will be packed full of silly—or, rather, *lively* stories that include the people around Monica, like the black cat and maid picking up useless knowledge from books; the president being a closet fanboy; the vice president yelling; droopy eyes getting pulled every which way; the butcher's son flying around; the villainess being a villainess... Basically, it'll be *Silent Witch* as usual.

The fourth volume's after story is scheduled to release in October 2022 in Japan.

The first volume of Tobi Tana's manga adaptation is also on sale in Japan now. Her technique is amazing—the way panels and speech bubbles are used, the variety and pacing, and how charmingly she draws the characters. As the original author, I feel like a kid on a field trip watching a master at work. Please continue to support *Secrets of the Silent Witch's* manga adaptation as well.

I love the scene where Nero drinks coffee.

Nanna Fujimi, thank you again for the gorgeous illustrations. The hairstyles

are just so intricate! And adorable! Seeing them in full color in the inserts was very moving. Monica looks so wonderful that even without knowing much about fashion, she would light up upon glimpsing herself in a mirror. It's just so awe-inspiring to see the scene come alive in a picture like that.

I especially love how Nero is a little ball of fluff on her head in the color spread at the front.

This fourth volume made it out into the world only because of so many people's support. I'd like to extend a heartfelt thanks to all my readers.

I'd also like to thank everyone who has sent me fan letters and seasonal greeting cards. I'm so happy to hear your impressions and support firsthand. I love reading letters, and I never get tired of seeing all their different styles—whether delicate and beautiful or poppy and cute. Whenever I see a cute little character I've never heard of before, I can't help but smile. And every time I open a letter sealed with wax, I straighten up in my chair. Some people even include gorgeous illustrations or cute bookmarks, and I'm constantly looking for a nice case to keep them all in. Really, thank you all so, so much.

I'll keep devoting my efforts to writing, so I hope we can meet again in the next volume.

Matsuri Isora

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